



STRATEGY AND TACTICS OF THE SALVADORAN FMLN GUERRILLAS

**Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint
for Future Conflicts**

**José Angel Moroni Bracamonte,
David E. Spencer**



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Acronyms

ARENA	Nationalist Republican Alliance, anti-FMLN right-wing party.
ATS	See BATS.
BAH	Amilcar Hernandez Battalion of the ERP.
BAS	Alejandro Solano Battalion of the FPL (also called K-93).
BAT	Augustin Ticas Battalion of the ERP.
BATS	Anfres Torres Sanchez Battalion of the FPL (also called SS-20).
BBC	Bruno Caballero Battalion of the ERP.
BCA	Carlos Arias Battalion of the RN.
BDA	Dolores Ardin Battalion of the RN.
BEMS	Ernesto Morales Sandoval Battalion of the FPL (also called S-7).
BFPM	Felipe Peña Mendoza Brigade of the FPL.
BHCC	Heroes of Cutumay Camones Battalion.
BJC	Juan Carlos Battalion of the ERP.
BJM	Juan Mendez Battalion of the FPL (also called X-21).
BPR	Popular Revolutionary Bloc, mass umbrella organization of the FMLN.
BRAC	Rafael Aguiñada Carranza Battalion of the FAL.

BRAT	Rafael A. Torres Battalion of the FAL.
BRAZ	Rafael Arce Zablah Brigade of the ERP.
BSH	Sergio Hernandez Battalion of the RN.
BTH	Heroic Workers Battalion of the ERP.
CEMFA	Military Training Center, located in La Union.
CG	General Command, the evolution of the DRU with the same functions.
COBRAC	Commandos of the BRAC, FES group assigned to the Rafael Aguiñada Carranza Battalion of the FAL.
DGI	General Directorate of Intelligence, the Cuban Intelligence Service.
DLAD	Luis Alberto Diaz Detachment (PRTC).
DRU	Unified Revolutionary Directorate, military command of the FMLN (later changed to CG).
EMS	See BEMS.
ERP	Popular Revolutionary Army, one of the five FMLN factions.
ESAF	Salvadoran Armed Forces.
F-30	FPL Strategic FES unit under command of high command.
FAL	Armed Forces of Liberation, one of the five FMLN factions.
FALN	National Liberation Armed Forces, armed wing of the FAL.
FAPL	Armed Forces of National Liberation, armed wing of the FPL.
FDR	Democratic Revolutionary Front, FMLN umbrella organization of supporting political parties.
FES	Special Select Forces, the generic term for special forces of the FMLN.
FMLN	Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front.
FPL	Popular Liberation Front, one of the five FMLN factions.
FSLN	Sandinista National Liberation Front.
GOES	Government of El Salvador.
J-27	FES of the RN.
J-28	Tactical FES of the FPL assigned to each battalion.

K-93	Alejandro Solano Battalion (BAS) of the FPL.
MPLA	Angolan Popular Liberation Movement.
OP	Observation Post.
PCS	Salvadoran Communist Party. Political wing of the FAL.
PRAL	Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, ESAF special forces.
PRTC	Central American Workers Party, one of the five FMLN factions.
RN	National Resistance, one of the five FMLN factions.
S-7	Ernesto Morales Sandoval Battalion (BEMS) of the FPL.
SAM	Surface to Air Missile.
SMF	Strategic Mobile Forces, FMLN guerrilla regulars.
SS-20	Anfres Torres Sanchez Battalion of the FPL (BATS).
TAP	Popular Weapons Workshop, used in 1989 urban offensive.
TECMA	Comandante Manglio Armijo Special Troops. FES battalion of the ERP.
U-24	Strategic FES of the FAL.
U-S-15	FES of the RN.
X-21	Juan Mendez Battalion (BJM) of the FPL.

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Introduction

The demise of the Cold War ended the bipolar struggle and terminated the great majority of the brushfire wars that had developed in the Third World as a consequence of the struggle between the great powers. The war in El Salvador was coincidentally one of the very last of these wars that was fought under these parameters. However, several subversive groups in Latin America still persist in the aftermath of the East-West conflict. Some examples are the movements in Peru, Colombia, and Guatemala. The recent uprising and continued fighting in Chiapas, Mexico show that insurgency warfare did not die out with the end of the Cold War. Instead, they indicate that the idea of gaining power and imposing social reforms through violence and force is still alive and well in the Latin American region.

In El Salvador, the insurgent war by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) formally ended on January 31, 1992, when the armed forces of El Salvador gave their Report to the Nation, in which it was declared that the military campaign to defend the state against Marxist-Leninist aggression had been suspended. The mission had been successfully accomplished due to the heroism, valor, sacrifice, and professionalism of the Salvadoran soldier.

Today, as a consequence of the January 16, 1992 Peace Accords, the FMLN has been fully integrated into society and the formal institutions of the nation. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the war in El Salvador was closely watched by subversive and guerrilla organizations wishing to glean lessons for their own wars of liberation. It is not surprising, then, to see FMLN-developed concepts show up around the region, such as among the insurgent groups of Guatemala and Mexico. Guerrilla strate-

gies and tactics used in El Salvador are now appearing in new conflicts. The conflict in El Salvador had not only a regional impact, but apparently was also watched by insurgent forces around the world.

A recent event worthy of mention was a statement made in the January 30, 1994 issue of the *Washington Post* by the Somali military chief, Colonel Sharif Hassan Giumale. Giumale was the Somali commander responsible for the October 3, 1993 downing of two U.S. helicopters and the damaging of a third using only small arms. Giumale declared that he had based his operation on his study of Latin American insurgent anti-aircraft tactics. It is very important to note that the Salvadoran FMLN was the only Latin American guerrilla group to develop efficient anti-aircraft tactics, and to observe that in Somalia, like El Salvador, the helicopters were shot down by the efficient placement and use of infantry weapons alone.

The fact is that the majority of the insurgent movements share some level of solidarity among themselves, and are permanently sharing their tactics and methods with each other. In other words, they are methods without borders and are continually being updated and adapted according to each operational environment. It is necessary to emphasize that during the war in El Salvador the FMLN received heavy international assistance, and itself assimilated tactics developed in Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Nicaragua, and elsewhere.

In addition, new, irregular warfare doctrinal concepts were implemented in El Salvador, such as concentration and deconcentration, attrition warfare, strategic dispersion, popular artillery, and so on. These concepts gave a dynamism to the subversive military guidelines under the overall guidance of an organized military structure. Because of this, it is important to analyze how these concepts fit into the strategic and tactical thinking of insurgent operations.

These facts and previously mentioned aspects are the basis of the justification for the current work, which is based on information acquired through personal combat experience. This book does not intend to describe all of the tactics used by the FMLN during the conflict, but rather to emphasize those that had the greatest impact on the evolution of the war.

It is also important to make clear, from a professional point of view, that the armed forces of El Salvador countered and neutralized each of these new strategies and tactics in turn, forcing the FMLN to seek a share of the political power through negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations, and thus put an end to the conflict.

Finally, there is no question that the FMLN did not win the war in El Salvador. This was because:

1. The armed forces of El Salvador stopped them from taking power through violence.

2. The vast majority of Salvadorans failed to support the FMLN guerrillas.
3. The Democratic process that began in 1982 was legitimized and accepted by the people of El Salvador over the revolutionary plan offered to them by the FMLN.
4. The Marxist-Leninist doctrine no longer was viable on the American continent due to the fall of the Soviet Union and the consequent impact this event had on international support.
5. The indiscriminate use of terrorism and sabotage alienated the majority of the people.

The only winners in the Salvadoran war were the people themselves, who suffered communist aggression on a daily basis during twelve years of war and who, through the mediation of the United Nations, were able to agree to embrace peace through the Peace Accords.

Today, the long-suffering people of El Salvador have given the FMLN an opportunity to share the model they fought so hard to destroy, and have also given them the opportunity to express themselves openly in the very heart of democracy.

To summarize, in this book we want to share the largely operational and tactical information, experiences, and lessons of the Salvadoran insurgents so that the professional community can better understand the dynamics and process of escalation of the Salvadoran experience, and find lessons from this experience for the future.

José Angel Moroni Bracamonte

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Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN Guerrillas

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1

Background to the Insurgent Movement in El Salvador

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FIVE FACTIONS

The story of the guerrilla forces of El Salvador begins in 1932, when the Communist organizer and agitator, Farabundo Marti, led an uprising of the Indian peasants of western El Salvador. The military, under Maximiliano Hernandez, crushed the revolt in a matter of days. The speed, efficiency, and ruthlessness of the counter-revolt earned this event the nickname of “La Matanza,” or The Massacre. While the military is commonly accused of having indiscriminately massacred thirty thousand peasants, Thomas Anderson, the most prominent scholar on the subject, puts the number of dead at somewhere between two thousand and ten thousand.¹ Farabundo Marti and his cohorts were captured, tried, and condemned to death for treason and conspiracy. Their sentences were carried out by hanging. Farabundo Marti now became the figurehead and martyr of the Salvadoran revolutionary movement. While the Communist party continued to survive in El Salvador, it maintained a very low profile, flourishing mostly among radical university students and some radical priests.

The dynamics that led to the civil war in the decade of the 1980s began to develop in 1969. In July of that year, El Salvador and Honduras went to war over the abuse of Salvadoran immigrants in Honduras. In a hundred-hour war, the Salvadoran army soundly beat the Honduran army on the ground, while the Honduran air force gained domination of the skies. However, despite the victory, the net result of the war was that (1) El Salvador was condemned by the Organization of American States for attacking Honduras and slapped with an arms embargo; (2) the Central

American Common Market, which most favored El Salvador, was prematurely terminated, bringing economic hardship; and (3) El Salvador was forced to absorb somewhere in the order of one hundred thousand expatriate refugees from Honduras. The price of the military victory for El Salvador was a simultaneous diplomatic, economic, and social crisis of vast proportions.

In 1970, shortly after the war with Honduras, a small group of Salvadoran Communists, heavily influenced by the national crisis, broke off from the pro-Soviet Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS) and formed the Popular Liberation Front (FPL). The leader of the breakaway group went by the alias Cayetano Carpio. Carpio felt that it was time to prepare for revolution in El Salvador. He and his followers were heavily influenced by the war in Vietnam, and believed that the Communists could only come to power through a prolonged war of national liberation, in contrast to the PCS, which advocated gradually coming to power through participation in the existing political system. Two years later, another group, the Popular Revolutionary Army (ERP), broke off from the FPL. The ERP was inspired by the success of the terrorists in Uruguay (the *Tupamaros*) and the Argentine Montonero terrorists. This group broke away from the FPL, contending that instead of victory by prolonged rural war, winning power was possible through urban terrorism and insurrection. In 1976, there were acrimonious debates within the ERP over the relative importance of military action versus political action. The result of the debates was the murder of the ERP's most prominent figure, the internationally recognized poet Roque Dalton. Dalton's murder was perpetrated to suppress debate and keep the organization together; instead, however, the pro-political action members, seeing that they too could become targets for annihilation, broke away from the ERP and formed their own group, the National Resistance (RN). Their leader was Ernesto Jovel. The leaders of the remaining ERP were Joaquin Villalobos and Guadalupe Martinez.

Around this same time another group began to form. Known as the Central American Workers Party, (PRTC), it was made up of radical university students and led by a man using the alias Roberto Roca, who had visions of a pan-Central American socialist revolution, not just in El Salvador. From its inception it began to form a regionwide network of terrorist cells, but never attracted a very large following. Although in contact with the other Salvadoran terrorist groups, it always remained a law unto itself. All of these groups carried out petty terrorism between 1970 and 1979 (kidnappings, murder, extortion, bombing, bank robbery, etc.). The final group to form part of the FMLN was the Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL).² Just before the outbreak of total revolution, the Salvadoran Communist Party, under the Handal brothers, Shafik and Farid, decided to abandon Soviet guidelines and adopt violent revolution. The FAL was the

armed wing of the Communist party and, although formed later than the other factions, was the next-largest party after the FPL and the ERP. The FAL proved critical to the success of the FMLN's efforts. The influence and international contacts of the Communist party would ensure that the guerrilla forces of El Salvador would receive more international aid from the Socialist world than any other Latin American insurgent group ever received during the Cold War.

However, the spark that touched off the escalated growth of the Salvadoran guerrilla apparatus was an event in neighboring Nicaragua on July 19, 1979. This date marked the overthrow of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The Salvadoran guerrillas, as well as guerrilla and terrorist groups all over Latin America, provided men, training, weapons, and money to the Sandinistas. Because of this, and their ideological commitment, the Sandinistas would now allow other Latin American guerrilla groups to use Nicaragua as a base for spreading revolution throughout the hemisphere. By investing in the Nicaraguan revolution, the Salvadorans and other Latin American guerrilla organizations made investments in their own struggles for "national liberation."

Cuba would also play a prominent role. Fidel Castro's vision was not limited to El Salvador but was focused on the whole of Central America and even South America. The Cubans had played a key role in the Nicaraguan revolution by setting up an arms shipment infrastructure. Shipments to the Sandinistas had been very successful.

The Cubans soon realized that this network had the potential for far more than merely the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. When the Somoza government suddenly collapsed in July 1979, a good number of weapons in the pipeline had not yet been delivered to the Sandinistas. The Cubans realized that other revolutions were beginning to develop in Central America, so they kept the network alive and had the undelivered weapons set aside for the next time they were needed. This turned out to be in El Salvador.

However, before Cuba or Nicaragua could play a major role, serious problems had to be solved in El Salvador. The greatest problem was that the different guerrilla factions hated each other passionately, and spent more time arguing and fighting among themselves than they did fighting the government. In early 1980, the Cuban DGI representative for El Salvador called a meeting of the Salvadoran guerrilla factions in Managua, Nicaragua. He was very blunt. The Cubans and Nicaraguans were willing to turn on the pipelines of weapons set up for the Sandinistas and provide massive military training for the Salvadorans only on the condition that they unite and form a single, coordinated opposition front as the Sandinistas had. Despite the bitter feelings among them, the different Salvadoran factions agreed to the Cuban conditions. They quickly

formed a united front. The name chosen for the front was the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, shortened to the Spanish acronym FMLN.³

MILITARY STRUCTURE AND ORIGINS OF THE FMLN

The political-military organization of the FMLN was the umbrella organization of the five militant revolutionary factions. The FMLN was led by a five-person directorate, with each organization represented equally on the directorate. This directorate was known as the Unified Revolutionary Directorate (DRU) and was based throughout the entire war in Managua.⁴ Later in the war, the name DRU was changed to General Command (CG). While theoretically each organization was represented equally on the directorate, the ERP and the FPL had the most power. This was logical because the ERP and the FPL had the largest and most experienced organizations. Eventually, the ERP would gain the upper hand, since the ERP was more willing to unquestioningly follow the advice and direction of the Cubans, and it controlled the access routes along which arms were shipped to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

In 1980, the Cubans and Nicaraguans pushed the FMLN to follow the Nicaraguan model of insurrection. To carry out this insurrection, the main focus of the FMLN's efforts in the next few months would be to create a powerful military machine on a par with the Salvadoran army. Captured guerrilla documents show that they planned to create a military apparatus of approximately fifteen thousand men completely equipped with an entire array of light infantry weapons.⁵ While the people were not lacking, the FMLN had a serious lack of adequate weapons and trained personnel. Cuba agreed to a massive training program. Thousands of Salvadoran guerrillas would be trained in Cuba over the next few months for the coming insurrection. This would be the most massive training of Latin American guerrillas ever undertaken by the Cubans in such a short period of time. Several hundred more would be trained in Nicaragua. The graduates of these courses would then return to El Salvador to provide the hard core of the fifteen thousand-man guerrilla apparatus. While training the Salvadorans would be relatively simple, arming them was another matter.

While there were quantities of weapons stored away from the old Nicaraguan revolution pipeline, there were not enough to arm fifteen thousand Salvadorans and simultaneously aid other revolutionary organizations in the hemisphere. This quantity of weapons was easily available from the Eastern bloc, but such a massive display of Eastern bloc weapons would automatically reveal the involvement of the Communist world and provoke the intervention of the United States. The weapons had to be of

Western origin, and they had to be on a par or better than current-issue weapons of the Salvadoran military.

To solve the problem, the Handal brothers went on a world tour to secure the international aid and weapons that the FMLN needed to rapidly build up the guerrilla army and secure the political and financial aid to operate this army for several years. Captured documents show that the FMLN was able to secure money, weapons, and offers of training from much of the Communist world. Key among these was the support offered by Vietnam. Vietnam had large stocks of weapons that had been left behind by the U.S. military or captured from South Vietnam in 1975. Vietnam offered to deliver large numbers of these weapons to Cuba, which would then insert them into the established pipeline to the Salvadoran guerrillas. The Cuban pipeline and the securing of weapons and resources from the world Communist countries guaranteed the FMLN a continual logistical flow. This flow was one of the key elements of the FMLN's military success, and allowed it to continue operations for twelve long years of war.⁶

The debut of the FMLN's initial efforts was the January 1981 "Final Offensive." However, this offensive failed to be final and began one of the fiercest wars in Latin American history. The military structures that emerged from the January 1981 baptism of fire were essentially those that were to remain constant throughout the entire length of the war.

In 1981, the FMLN was calculated to have twelve thousand armed elements, three thousand short of their goal. At their peak (1983–1984) they may have had as many as fourteen thousand armed members. However, through battle casualties, attrition, and the changing nature of the war, when hostilities ceased there were only between six thousand and eight thousand armed guerrillas distributed among the various factions on five war fronts. The different groups were unified under the General Command (CG). The five military commanders of each of the five FMLN factions made up the General Command of the FMLN. General strategy and tactics were established in meetings of the CG, then each of the faction commanders would pass the orders on to their respective organizations. In the beginning, the different factions were loathe to cooperate with each other, but by the latter half of the 1980s cooperation was very high, and the distinctions between factions were negligible. However, the factions did maintain their separate command structures and organic units throughout the conflict.

The DRU had two political organizations that were subordinate to it. The first was the umbrella front known as the Popular Revolutionary Bloc, or BPR. This front was composed of all of the internal political organizations that were for the revolution and against the government. Essentially, the BPR coordinated the political action of the mass organizations in El Salvador. This included protests, marches, rallies, strikes,

stoppages, and so on. The BPR lost importance soon after the 1981 Final Offensive, as all of the important cadres had been stripped from the various front groups to be incorporated into the regular guerrilla forces. This left the mass organizations leaderless for several years, and the BPR fizzled out of existence. However, mass organizations returned in force after 1985 and played a major role in FMLN strategy through the end of the war.⁷

The last component of the FMLN was the international political front known as the Democratic Revolutionary Front, or FDR. The FDR was composed of supposedly independent political parties and leaders that had left El Salvador for a variety of reasons. While they were not directly part of the FMLN, they supported the idea of a Leftist government in El Salvador. Although they did not openly advocate violent revolution, they felt that the FMLN was a preferable alternative to the government of El Salvador. Guillermo Ungo and Ruben Zamora were the prominent figures in this group. These politicians used their contacts and prestige to gain international recognition for the FMLN from Western nations, and were responsible for setting up a worldwide network of support groups to keep El Salvador in the headlines and pressure the United States to cut aid to the Salvadoran government. The FDR was able to attract the support of several important governments, such as Mexico, Spain, and France. Because of this, the FDR was initially a very important ally of the FMLN. However, over time the FDR found itself quickly being co-opted by the guerrillas and shoved aside as the DRU/CG imposed its criteria on the international posture of the anti-government forces. By 1988, the FDR ceased to exist when Ruben Zamora and Guillermo Ungo returned from exile to El Salvador to run in the elections. However, while the FDR ceased to exist, its international network did not, and the CG took over this network and continued to use it through the end of the war.

GENERAL ANALYSIS

The keys to the FMLN's survival were three fundamental factors: (1) the massive amounts of foreign aid, training, and technical assistance received; (2) its operational flexibility; and (3) its permanent effort of recruiting and expanding its base of support.

Foreign Aid

Few people realize the extent to which foreign aid poured into El Salvador to assist the FMLN. The amount of aid received by the Salvadoran military, one billion dollars over twelve years, is a well-publicized fact. While the precise figure is not known, it is not in the realm of fantasy to

speculate that somewhere near the same figure went to the FMLN. The guerrilla effort in El Salvador was without comparison the best-funded, best-organized, and best-supported guerrilla war ever fought on the American continent. Literally every guerrilla faction in Latin America, with the exception of Peru's Shining Path, contributed to the war with money, weapons, and personnel. In addition, the FMLN received advice from the PLO, the Basque ETA, and other worldwide terrorist organizations. These efforts were eclipsed by the training, money, and weapons provided by Cuba and Nicaragua, but they were still significant to the war effort. Cuba and Nicaragua acted as clearinghouses for assistance from abroad. Prominent among foreign donors were Vietnam, which provided weapons and limited training until late in the war; the Soviet Union, which provided funds and political training; East Germany, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia, Algeria, Angola, and others, all of whom made donations of money, weapons, and advice.

The tremendous amounts of aid received by the FMLN and the diversity of the sources guaranteed the survival of the organization throughout the twelve years of war. Furthermore, it made it impossible for the government and the armed forces to interdict and completely reduce the flow of this aid. If one route or source was blocked, it was merely channeled through another. There was never a lack of willing foreigners to help the FMLN.

Operational Flexibility

The second element that ensured the survival of the FMLN was its operational flexibility. Past Latin American guerrilla organizations (with the exception of the Sandinistas of Nicaragua) had failed miserably in their attempts to foment revolution. One of their principal shortcomings had been the strict correlation of military operations with ideology. In other words, how military operations were conducted (strategy and tactics) had been tied to the current ideology, and operational failures were viewed as the product of externalities, not poorly conceived operations and tactics. Tactical changes required a simultaneous overhaul of the ideology, a task that was difficult for idealistic revolutionaries. This operational rigidity doomed these groups to failure because it was only a matter of time before the local armed forces learned the tactical patterns and developed methods to defeat them. The FMLN never fell into this rigidity; instead it was dynamic and flexible in its approach. This may have had something to do with the fact that among the five organizations there were at least three different strategic and tactical approaches to guerrilla warfare. The ERP advocated direct military action to foment insurrection; this had worked in Nicaragua for the Sandinistas. The FPL adhered to the Vietnam model of a prolonged war, in which

sturdy infrastructures were established guaranteeing a constant flow of men and materiel. Through small but constant actions that killed or maimed a few of the enemy at a time, the will of the enemy was worn down and victory obtained. Finally, the RN felt that the key to the struggle lay in organizing the masses for concerted political action (demonstrations, protests, etc.) in combination with military action by guerrilla forces.

After the initial failure of insurrection strategy in 1981, the FMLN adopted a flexibility rarely seen in previous guerrilla groups. All subsequent strategies adopted by the FMLN were combinations of the three tendencies mentioned above, the difference being the priority given to any one tendency at any given time. The FMLN would change the priority depending on the current strategic situation. This strategic flexibility brought with it the adoption of flexible tactics. The FMLN had a flexible enough ideology that it could pick and choose between what worked and what didn't work; it was quick to recognize failure and discard unsuccessful tactics. There was little ideological veneer that had to be cracked in order to toss out a failed or obsolete military strategy or tactic. Conversely, the lack of ideological trappings allowed the FMLN to continually develop successful tactics that worked to near perfection. Consequently, the war was a war of wits as well as a war of military might. Both sides continually sought to develop new tactics to counter the tactics of the other. Just as the armed forces would adopt new tactics and begin to inflict serious losses on the FMLN, the guerrillas would change their tactics. The reverse of this relationship was true as well. This process of escalation continued right up to the end of the war, and because neither the armed forces nor the guerrillas were defeated militarily, the tactics of this war will probably see continued development in low-intensity conflicts elsewhere around the globe.

Continual Recruiting Effort

Finally, one of the FMLN's greatest achievements was its learning how to continually recruit replacements to keep its ranks replenished. This effort was known among the guerrillas as "expansion," and proved to be nearly unstoppable. In the early years, the FMLN concentrated on thorough ideological training before allowing a person to join the ranks of the combatants. This process, however, could last for years. Combatants were largely recruited from the families and friends of current members. However, the heavy casualties suffered and the need to maintain a large guerrilla force quickly forced the FMLN to change its standards. The FMLN found that it could induct unwilling people into the guerrilla forces, and through a series of tiered stages and indoctrination in service, develop guerrilla fighters that could step in and take the place



In 1983 the FMLN started to induct unwilling peasants into the guerrilla forces. Here a new group of blindfolded recruits are being screened by a Mexican commander of the FMLN.

of those that had fallen. This was not unlike the draft and induction methods adopted by armed forces all over the globe. Through this ingenious departure from ideology the FMLN secured a constant supply of trained recruits to maintain its required force levels. Toward the end of the war, the levels of regulars dropped off. This was largely due to depopulation in the war zones and to the great number of casualties suffered by the FMLN in the latter half of the 1980s. The FMLN lost more people than it could replace; however, there was a vast increase in the numbers of people in FMLN auxiliary organizations, such as mass fronts, militias, and so on. Recruiters, or expansionists (as the FMLN called them) were people of very high rank and importance. Recruiting for the FMLN was considered as important as the actual fighting of the war itself.

These three elements—foreign aid, operational flexibility, and expansion—were the three fundamental elements that allowed the FMLN to survive twelve long years of war. Without one of the triad, the FMLN would have been defeated in short order, like the vast majority of Latin American guerrilla organizations that had come before. However, what must be pointed out is that despite the three elements, the FMLN was unable to come to power through violence. The Salvadoran government, and particularly the armed forces, proved to be as resilient, tough, and resourceful as the FMLN. Starting from disadvantage, they fought the guerrillas to a standstill and forced them to the negotiating table. In the end, the armed forces survived as an institution and the FMLN was forced to become a disarmed political party with the right to participate in national politics like all other political parties.⁸ Any political power obtained by the FMLN in El Salvador has been and will be through the ballot box, not the bullet.

NOTES

1. Thomas P. Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).

2. The information in this first section is based on four sources:

Gabriel Zaid, "Enemy Colleagues: A Reading of the Salvadoran Tragedy," *Dissent* (Winter 1982).

FMLN, *La Guerra Revolucionaria del Pueblo* (El Salvador: Publicaciones FMLN, 1987), captured from guerrillas in 1989.

FPL, *Nacimiento de la Lucha Armada en El Salvador* (El Salvador, n.d.), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

U.S. Department of State, *The Guerrilla Movement in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C., July 1987).

3. Gabriel Zaid, "Enemy Colleagues: A Reading of the Salvadoran Tragedy," *Dissent* (Winter 1982).

4. U.S. Department of State, *The Guerrilla Movement in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C., July 1987).

5. FMLN, *Informe y Análisis Visto Desde el Exterior* (Nicaragua, March 11–13, 1981), captured from guerrillas in 1981.
6. Gabriel Zaid, "Enemy Colleagues."
7. Marco Antonio Grande, "Frente de Masas," *Análisis* (January 1989).
8. It should be pointed out that this was what the government had been offering the FMLN since 1982.

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2

FMLN Strategy

BACKGROUND

The general term for overall FMLN strategy was “Prolonged Popular War.” This term, borrowed directly from Asian revolutionary thought, particularly Ho Chi Minh, did not have the same meaning to the FMLN as it did to the Vietnamese. Basically, the FMLN implemented its strategy of Prolonged Popular War with three different operational modes: guerrilla warfare, maneuver warfare, and attrition warfare. The FMLN was flexible with these three operational modes, and combined all of these elements on the five war fronts. Basic to all of these modes was the idea of nonlinear military tactics.

FMLN military strategy was a product of three major lines of thought on revolutionary process, corresponding to three of the factions of the FMLN. During the early 1970s, the guerrilla groups had experienced bitter internal arguments about which strategy to adopt. The result had been bloody feuding and intrigue that led to the splintering of the revolutionary groups and the creation of the five separate Salvadoran guerrilla factions. During this time, the operational mode of Prolonged Popular War consisted of violent mass action supported by urban terrorist cells. Each faction had its own variant of this theme. In 1980, the Cuban ultimatum of unity or no aid brought the five factions reluctantly back together. The resulting strategy of this unity was the product of the integration and compromise of the three major strategic lines of thought of the major FMLN factions.

The ERP

The three major divisions of strategic thought within the FMLN were represented by the ERP, the FPL, and the RN. The ERP was most influenced by Cuba, Nicaragua, and the guerrillas of South America. They viewed the government as weak and the population as ready to revolt if given the opportunity. All the population needed was an extra shove. To the ERP this shove would be spectacular military action that would spearhead the way for total insurrection. The ERP placed little value on the need to politically organize the masses. Instead, its priority was on military action, particularly headline-grabbing military action, that would infuse the masses with revolutionary euphoria to the point of insurrection. The ERP used mass action as a means of gaining new recruits, and as a screen to cover its military action. To sum up, the ERP felt that the most sure strategy for overthrowing the government was through massive, nationwide military action that would attract the people to join in an insurrection.

The RN

The RN strategy was diametrically opposed to that of the ERP. The RN had broken away from the ERP after bloody arguments over their strategic differences. While the RN also viewed the government as weak, it felt that the best way to overthrow the government was through action by the masses, rather than military action. It based its model more on the U.S. civil-rights protests of the 1960s, and on El Salvador's own experience in 1944 when General Maximiliano Hernandez was overthrown by a broad-based public protest. The priority was to organize labor and trade associations and develop alliances between these and newly created groups for mass acts of civil disobedience and protest. Military action, to the RN, had the secondary role of supporting these activities. Military action was to be used as a means of enhancing the propaganda value of a march or protest. Alternatively, it might be used as a means of protecting activities of mass action against police or military units trying to control or suppress acts of civil disobedience. The value of military action was its enhancement of political action, not so much as a means of destroying the enemy. The RN felt that in the face of mass action, the enemy would eventually find it impossible to govern and collapse on its own. Purely military operations were relegated to a secondary or support role. Of the three strategic lines of thought, the RN strategy was probably the least influenced by foreign political thought, and the most authentically Salvadoran.

The FPL

The FPL strategy was a direct import from Vietnam. The FPL was convinced that Central America, and specifically El Salvador, would become the United States' next Vietnam. The United States would never allow a second Nicaragua and merely stand by and watch the Salvadoran government fall. Before it came to this, it would intervene directly with military force. The FPL envisioned the invasion of El Salvador by U.S. troops and a prolonged resistance to this invasion by Salvadoran guerrillas in the hills and mountains of Chalatenango and Morazan. If the war lasted long enough, the United States, as it had been in Vietnam, would be forced to withdraw because of internal political pressure, and the guerrilla forces could then pick up the pieces and take power. The FPL had two priorities. The first was to establish the infrastructure of resistance in the remote areas. This included creating guerrilla and militia units, establishing base camps and fortified regions, organizing the civilians in the area to support the war effort by establishing shadow government structures, setting up committees of production, and so on. The FPL co-opted and organized entire villages to provide logistical support and recruits to the guerrilla organization. Often this was done under the guise of religious programs that were administered by radical priests. The FPL believed the lesson of Vietnam was that if the war dragged on long enough, and enough public pressure was brought to bear on the U.S. government, it could not sustain a counter-insurgency war overseas. The second task, then, was to establish international support groups, particularly in the United States, to disseminate guerrilla propaganda and pressure the U.S. government to stay out, or get out of El Salvador. The FPL organized a number of support groups in the United States and around the world for this purpose.¹ These support groups would play a key role in the revolutionary struggle.

THE 1981 FINAL OFFENSIVE

FMLN Internal Rivalries, Cuban Coercion, and the Dominance of the ERP

In 1980, when the factions came together under Cuban and Nicaraguan sponsorship, the differences in strategic thinking resurfaced. With the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua fresh in everyone's mind, the Cubans insisted that the FMLN follow a similar strategy to come to power in El Salvador. The Sandinistas had launched a series of insurrections against the Somoza government. The first one, in September 1978, had been easily defeated by the Nicaraguan National Guard, but it had also made Nicaraguans aware of how strong the Sandinistas were, and each succes-

sive insurrection had gotten stronger and stronger, receiving more and more political, military, and popular support, until they finally toppled the Somoza government. One of the arguments favoring this strategy over a prolonged strategy was that the Carter administration in the United States, which had allowed the Sandinistas to topple Somoza, was apparently on its way out, and the next administration, which was bound to be more conservative, would be much more prone to intervention. A quick insurrection with the benign Carter administration in power was preferable to a prolonged war that would largely take place under a new, unfriendly conservative administration. A quick insurrection would present the new administration with a *fait accompli*, an irreversible situation, that the United States would be forced to acknowledge. This was the model that the Cubans urged the FMLN to adopt, and since they were providing the weapons, training, and funding, Havana had a high degree of leverage on the activities of the Salvadoran insurgents. Since the strategic thinking of the ERP was in close harmony with the Sandinista model sponsored by the Cubans, the ERP became, in effect, the spokesman for the Cuban position. Previously, the FPL had been the Cuban darlings, and up to 1980 was the guerrilla organization with the most clout, most people, best weapons, and best training. The Cubans then switched their major support from the FPL to the ERP.² Consequently, at this juncture, the Cuban-backed ERP rapidly took over the dominant position. The ERP established its strongholds in the Eastern zone of the country, Morazan, and the swamps of Jucuaran. Since these strongholds were the closest to Nicaragua, for the most part, arms shipments to the FMLN were routed to the entire coalition through these territories, and consequently through the ERP. The agreement made by the five commanders of the FMLN was that no matter who received the weapons, they were to be divided up proportionally among all the organizations. In these early days, the ERP did not always follow the spirit of this agreement. While weapons may have been divided proportionally, the best weapons always went to the ERP. Sometimes the ERP was more blatant and openly kept most of a particular weapons shipment for itself.³ Other factions were rewarded according to their adherence to the Cuban-ERP plan, and subsequently, rifts began to appear in the FMLN ranks. The RN rebelled against being subjected to foreign, and especially ERP domination and micromanagement, and withdrew from the unified front. Several weeks later RN leader Ernesto Jovel died mysteriously, and the RN soon rejoined the unified front.⁴ This sent a strong message to the remaining factions. Through a little bit of arm twisting, the ERP strategy was imposed. Although this strategy would eventually be discarded, the ERP gained a dominant position within the FMLN that it would maintain throughout the remainder of the war.

THE THREE ELEMENTS OF THE 1981 INSURRECTION

The Cuban-sponsored ERP plan for insurrection called for three main components. First, a nationwide military offensive in which all of El Salvador's main garrisons would be attacked simultaneously by strong guerrilla forces. The second component was a national strike to coincide with the military offensive. All transportation, all industry, and all commerce would be paralyzed for several days. The third component was a supposed rebellion within the ranks of the armed forces. Part of the military would defect and come over to the guerrilla side with their men and weapons.⁵

Plan Puente

The ERP-dominated FMLN placed its first priority on the simultaneous military offensive over the other two parts of the plan. Since at this time the armed guerrilla forces within El Salvador were very small and poorly equipped, the FMLN priority was the rapid creation of a large guerrilla force that could face the army. For this endeavor they developed a plan known as "Plan Puente." The guerrillas calculated that they would need a fifteen thousand-man force, the equivalent of the Salvadoran armed forces at that time. This force would be armed with automatic rifles, light and heavy machine guns, bazookas, and mortars.⁶ They sent out a committee of people on a world tour of the Communist and Socialist countries to solicit the financial and military aid they would need for Plan Puente. This endeavor will be more thoroughly described in another section of this book, but it should be mentioned that the FMLN was very successful, and secured more than enough aid for its plan on this single tour. The weapons, money, and support for the force were now available; the problem would be getting these items to El Salvador.

A second problem in Plan Puente was that the FMLN had very few militarily trained personnel. A few had received training in Cuba and some had acquired limited combat experience in Nicaragua, but the majority were untrained. To correct this deficiency, the Cubans and Nicaraguans agreed to conduct the training. A figure of two thousand men and women guerrillas trained in Cuba and Nicaragua during 1980 alone is probably a conservative one.⁷ Different training courses that were conducted included company, platoon, and squad leadership courses, courses on the manufacture of weapons, courses on the use of mortars, light artillery, and heavy machine guns, special forces training such as for sappers and combat swimmers, communications courses, first aid, regular infantry training, and so on. The movement of these masses of people to the training camps was disguised by sending them in small groups at staggered time intervals, and routing most indirectly to their destinations.

Some of the groups travelled directly to Nicaragua by boat or bus, and then to Cuba. Others travelled first to Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, Costa Rica, or Panama, then made their way to Nicaragua, and then to Cuba. In Nicaragua, the movement and training were conducted clandestinely to avoid detection by locals or foreigners who might be curious. Guerrilla passports were not stamped in Nicaragua or Cuba. The return trip to El Salvador had to be made with equal caution, and no one who went to Cuba or Nicaragua travelled the same route back to El Salvador.⁸ The need to move people clandestinely in and out of El Salvador greatly slowed down the process of building up trained cadres. As a consequence, fewer guerrillas than the FMLN desired received training in time for the offensive, and a significant number of the trained FMLN cadres were not be able to reach the country by the date of the offensive. To remedy this problem, the FMLN planned to conduct a landing on the eastern shore of El Salvador. The strongest FMLN forces were in this area, and they felt they could liberate enough territory or tie down the government forces in this region long enough to successfully carry out the landing. Among the forces that would be landed were several contingents of Latin American volunteers, with heavy representation from Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay.⁹ The internationals would make up for the lower-than-desired number of trained Salvadorans. Among the weapons the guerrillas planned to land were light artillery pieces, and even some armored vehicles.¹⁰ These weapons would give the guerrillas parity with the government armed forces.¹¹

Infiltration of the Armed Forces

The second part of the ERP-dominated plan was the division of the government armed forces. Infiltration of the armed forces was largely an ERP operation, and the ERP continually assured the rest of the FMLN that it was talking to a large number of officers that promised to cross over to the guerrillas with their units when the offensive came.¹² The guerrillas did not expect half of the armed forces to defect. Their expectation was probably closer to one-fourth or one-third. While the precise guerrilla expectation is academic, the FMLN expected several key garrisons to come over to its side. A large portion of a military force suddenly switching sides would be a great moral blow that would also greatly increase the military capability of the guerrillas. However, the most important aspect of the defection was that the defection of this sizeable portion of the military to the FMLN would deliver a powerful blow to morale. Officers wouldn't know who they could trust. This would greatly hamper government operations, the FMLN hoped, to the point of collapse.

The General Strike

The final element of the Final Offensive was the national strike. Massive civil disobedience would paralyze the nation and make it impossible for the government to function. The FMLN plan called for the masses to go out into the streets and rebel. They were to set up roadblocks and barricades, sabotage streets and thoroughfares, sabotage industries, sack stores, and so on. This would force the government to disperse its forces to maintain order. The barricades and roadblocks would cut off and isolate the military units from each other as well as keep them cooped up in their installations. The only way the military could move and operate would be through the use of massive, indiscriminate force; in short, by causing a massacre. A massacre was exactly what the guerrillas wanted, because while in the short run it would allow the armed forces to operate, in the long run it would turn the remainder of the people against the armed forces and attract international condemnation. The incredible thing about this element of the FMLN plan was that the guerrillas felt no need to prepare for this event. The FMLN felt that it had overwhelming popular support, and all it had to do was advise the political organizations in favor of the FMLN when and where, and they would take to the streets spontaneously. In fact, the FMLN was so sure of its popular support that it stripped political organizations bare of carefully cultivated cadres to form part of the guerrilla military apparatus.

Needless to say, the 1981 Final Offensive was a disaster. While military action did take place throughout much of the country, the guerrillas failed to attack simultaneously. Attacks were piecemeal and weak. Not a single town was "liberated," and not a single army garrison taken. Partial control was gained at the Second Brigade barracks at Santa Ana, where an army captain and his company defected. However, soldiers within the garrison, loyal to the government, resisted and forced the defectors to withdraw. Furthermore, in some areas the guerrillas failed to act at all.¹³ An FPL evaluation of the offensive accused the ERP in the La Union area, which was the best equipped, of failing to carry out its assignments. The RN, which had never agreed with the plan in the first place, failed to make any attacks.¹⁴

The military did not fracture as the ERP had predicted. Either the officers talking to the ERP had a change of heart, or they had been discovered and neutralized by army intelligence. For the most part, guerrilla infiltration of the army was detected early by the intelligence services of the army and the plan was frustrated. Only one military officer and his company defected to the FMLN from the garrison at Santa Ana. However, many of the soldiers from this unit deserted their officer and made their way back to government lines. Most of the remainder were killed in combat at a place called Cutumay Camones. So in the final tally, the military

supporters of the FMLN contributed next to nothing to the military effect of the offensive. The defection at Santa Ana was more of a psychological blow than anything else.

The national strike failed to materialize. Across the country only twenty thousand civilians came out into the streets to support the guerrillas.¹⁵ Most of these were concentrated in isolated pockets in or near the major cities. The pockets were easily contained and bypassed, so they represented little or no threat or impediment to the armed forces, which were able to operate throughout the country with relative ease.

The Salvadoran armed forces saw an opportunity to wipe the guerrillas out once and for all, and took a gamble. They launched a series of major sweeps in Guazapa, Chalatenango, Morazan, and San Vicente. These sweeps caused a lot of damage, but nearly exhausted the resources of the Salvadoran armed forces. In the lull that followed, the FMLN discovered that it was actually in a better position than it had been before the offensive.¹⁶

While the armed forces had won an important tactical victory, they had spent most of their resources in the effort, and while the United States had agreed to provide aid, the hesitancy of the U.S. Congress meant that this aid would only trickle into El Salvador. It would take time for it to be translated into effectiveness on the battlefield. In the interim, the guerrillas evaluated their performance during the offensive, and made a new plan.

The conclusion drawn by the FMLN was not that its strategic plan was a failure, but rather that it had failed to implement it properly. Lack of coordinated action between the factions was seen as the greatest failure. The army remained much more unified and calm during the offensive than expected. The army had reacted swiftly and professionally, pushing the guerrillas out of most areas within hours, and preventing the massive infiltration of personnel and weapons that was part of the plan. The infiltrators in the army officer corps had failed to act on the scale expected. When their loyalty was put to the test, officers proved to be loyal to the institution. As a consequence, the FMLN would never attempt to sway army officers to its side again. The offensive did not foment insurrection among the population. On the contrary, the vast majority shut their doors and stayed inside. This made the army's task of fighting the guerrillas much easier, as the guerrillas could not mix in with the civilians. The FMLN refused to believe that the Salvadoran people's reaction was due to lack of support, and attributed it entirely to government repression. In the FMLN's thinking, the government was able to repress the people because the guerrillas failed to deliver decisive blows to the armed forces. This had occurred because the guerrillas had failed to launch determined and coordinated attacks. At its root, the FMLN evaluation was that the failure of the offensive had been a tactical military failure, not a failure

of strategy. The strategy was viable if the FMLN improved its military apparatus.¹⁷

As mentioned earlier, the Salvadoran military was near the limit of its resources. New resources were coming in, but at a very slow rate. The new FMLN strategic modification planned to take advantage of government exhaustion. Due to the situation, the guerrillas enjoyed greater mobility and freedom of action than before the offensive. The FMLN took advantage of this freedom to bring in the rest of its Cuban- and Nicaraguan-trained cadres and the weapons to build a strong military organization. At this point in the war the guerrillas were receiving a much greater influx of weapons, ammunition, and trained personnel than the armed forces. The modified strategy called for a military offensive in the eastern part of the country, rather than on a countrywide level. The objective was to drive the government and the army from this area and declare liberated territory. The expectation was that formal recognition would be granted by some international entities, and open aid would be delivered to prosecute a full-scale war against the remaining government forces. The eastern part of the country was seen as ideal because the guerrillas had most of their strength as well as their most important logistical routes in this area. One of the logistical routes ran on the land from Nicaragua to Honduras and then into Morazan, and the second route ran by sea from the coast of Nicaragua, across the Gulf of Fonseca to Jucuaran.

The first step of this strategy was to build up the guerrilla military apparatus. With all of the weapons and personnel that had been brought into the country in recent months, and the relatively large numbers of new internal recruits, each organization within the FMLN formed battalion-size elements (the composition of these units will be described later in this book). They were the spearhead of the new guerrilla offensive. The second step of the strategy was to concentrate these new guerrilla units against military targets. As the guerrillas described it themselves, this was a strategy of concentrated forces attacking in a few, very narrow, and very well-defined directions.¹⁸

The new strategic phase kicked off in 1982 and was considered concluded by mid-1984. During this time, the guerrillas were able to enjoy some spectacular successes. However, their strategic goals were not accomplished. The guerrillas were not able to liberate any territory or take any major towns. The nations that had toyed with the idea of recognizing the FMLN backed off, and the recognition of the few countries that did fizzled into insignificance. However, some headway was gained. The army had attempted to control areas like Chalatenango and Morazan by locating platoon-size garrisons of soldiers or civil defense units in most of the towns in the region. These posts were easy prey for the concentrated guerrilla battalions and brigades. After several were overrun, the govern-

ment was forced to abandon a large number of posts in the less accessible regions of Chalatenango and Morazan in order to concentrate and conserve its forces. However, even though the FMLN forced the army to abandon these posts, the guerrillas were never able to prevent the army from conducting operations in these areas at will.¹⁹ They were never able to take and hold a major town or urban center, and even though they tried to isolate the East by destroying both the Puente de Oro and the Cuscatlan bridges, they could not hold the terrain around the bridges to prevent the army engineers from throwing up World War II-vintage Bailey bridges to reestablish the link.

Despite some humiliating tactical defeats, the Salvadoran military proved to be extremely flexible and resilient. It absorbed punishing guerrilla blows and returned to the fight again, better, stronger, and wiser than before. International observers and members of the press predicted several times that the military was on the verge of defeat, but the military failed to collapse.²⁰ Not only did the military fail to collapse, but it meted out at least as much punishment as it received. Although the blows did not grab headlines the way major guerrilla attacks did, the armed forces gradually began to gain the initiative. U.S. aid began to make a difference in the fighting. The aid allowed the Salvadoran army to create the Immediate Reaction Battalions such as the Atlacatl, Belloso, Atonal, Arce, Bracamonte, and the Cazador (Hunter) Battalions. These battalions were permanently out in the combat zones, conducting counter-insurgency operations. In the place of the small, fixed posts, the permanent operation of these elite units represented the government's presence in Chalatenango and Morazan. Unlike the posts, the elite battalions were constantly on the move, making them less vulnerable to massed assault.

The United States also increased the size and quality of the Salvadoran air force, particularly its helicopter assets. This gave the elite units greater mobility to be able to attack guerrilla positions from any direction. An escalation took place as the guerrillas tried to match the elite units in terms of weapons and men. Relatively large-scale, set-piece conventional battles took place in which both sides suffered heavy casualties. However, the balance was in favor of the government and the armed forces. While fighting was heavy, it mostly occurred in the remote areas of Chalatenango and Morazan. In this sense, the government forces were able to restrict guerrilla influence to a small area of El Salvador, pinning down their forces. Most importantly, this left the government free to carry out political and economic reform in the rest of the country generally unhindered. Public support for the guerrillas began to evaporate and was further damaged by FMLN recruiting efforts. To keep up the necessary levels of strength, the guerrillas began to use coercive methods of recruitment. There was a noted drop in popular support for the guerrillas in mainstream El Salvador.²¹

PROLONGED POPULAR WAR AND ATTRITION

The FMLN realized that the current strategy was not working. The military escalation was using up alarming amounts of ammunition, weapons, and men. At the current levels, the guerrillas could not match the scale of U.S. aid that was coming into the country. Furthermore, the attempt to match the government militarily had caused the FMLN to almost entirely abandon the political struggle. The net effect was the rapid loss of FMLN popularity and its ever-increasing isolation from national life. The FMLN high command took note of its collision course with disaster and began to formulate a new strategy.²²

Between mid-1984 and early 1985, the FMLN high command began to issue instructions to its units that they should start conducting "guerrilla operations." It was ironic that the FMLN guerrillas, who had started out as an unconventional force, now had conventional training and modes of operation so ingrained that the guerrilla units had difficulty implementing the "new," irregular tactics.²³ The high command realized that more specific guidelines were necessary and decided to hold a meeting in May and June of 1985 to formalize a new strategy to make the continuation of the struggle possible.

The main question was how to defeat the Salvadoran army, now heavily armed and funded by the United States. The FMLN turned to the lesson of Vietnam, where over a period of 30 years the Vietnamese had successively worn down the superior French and then the American forces, until both had given up and gone home. The will and determination of these forces were worn down by attrition. This was the military strategy that the FMLN now chose to adopt, in an attempt to defeat the Salvadoran army. Another fundamental question was how to break out of its isolated strongholds in Morazan and Chalatenango, and spread the war across all of El Salvador. At this time, the term "Prolonged Popular War" as a description for the overall strategy became formalized in FMLN vocabulary.²⁴ In essence, the FMLN now turned away from the ERP-Cuban thought, and adopted a new strategy loosely based on that of the FPL, with elements of the RN and ERP lines of thought incorporated.

According to the document produced by the May-June 1985 meeting, the new strategy called for the FMLN to break up its battalions and brigades and disperse them into scattered, platoon-size elements. The goal would no longer be to seek a small number of decisive battles with the armed forces. Rather, the goal would be to wear down the army through attrition. Previously, in the face of an army offensive, the guerrillas would leave a rearguard force and withdraw the bulk of their forces from the enemy's path, unless they saw an opportunity to strike from a position of strength, or they were forced to fight. The goal had been to seek battles of annihilation to capture great quantities of weapons and deliver debil-

itating blows to the government forces. This was no longer to be the case. In the face of an army operation, guerrilla forces were not to flee. Instead, small units of guerrillas were to shadow army units and carry out low-cost, pinprick attacks of opportunity. This would include laying mines and booby traps in the path of the army advance, ambushing point and flank elements, sniping at the main body of troops, and conducting harassing attacks with popular artillery such as ramps, homemade mortars, and homemade rifle grenades.²⁵ Emphasis on homemade weapons was to simplify the currently overstretched guerrilla logistical system and allow the various units to be partially self-sufficient.

The objective of this new mode of attack was not annihilation or the capture of large numbers of weapons, but rather to inflict a slow, steady stream of casualties on the government troops while paying the lowest cost possible in ammunition, resources, and blood. While in the short run numbers of government casualties would be low, over time the casualties would add up, and instead of being inflicted in open combat, they would be inflicted by an enemy that was rarely seen. Soldiers would never be sure when or where they would be shot at, step on a mine, or run into an ambush. Mental tension would be constant and high, severely affecting morale. The theory was that if morale could be brought down to a certain level, the army would lose its will to fight and collapse.²⁶ In other words, the strategy aimed at winning a psychological victory over the armed forces, rather than physical victory. In the face of the armed forces' new and superior weaponry, this was a rational decision.

Two other factors would aid this new strategy of lowering enemy morale. The first was to take the war into the areas of the nation where it was currently inactive. The second was to conduct a campaign of constant sabotage against the transportation, communications, and economic infrastructure of the country.

The FMLN considered sabotage of the national infrastructure and economy as a legitimate and strategically necessary irregular military strategy to overthrow the government. Sabotage could be considered either an offensive or a defensive tactic. Attacks were usually against the electrical infrastructure (towers, posts, etc.), the national transportation network of bridges and roads, and the communications grid. To the FMLN, sabotage of the national economy and infrastructure was as important a weapon as the government's artillery and air power. Sabotage of the national economy was how the FMLN offset U.S. aid, by forcing the money to be used to repair damage done, and by dispersing the military's forces.²⁷ In a propaganda ploy, the FMLN offered to cease its sabotage operations if the armed forces would give up the use of air power.²⁸ This offer was not accepted.

In the plan to disperse its strategic mobile force guerrilla units into



FMLN strategic mobile force guerrilla preparing to fire a homemade 58mm mortar, 1985.

platoon-size elements, the FMLN called for these units to expand out from the traditional war zones of Morazan, Chalatenango, and elsewhere. On top of conducting classical guerrilla operations itself, each strategic mobile force platoon was to be responsible for the creation of local guerrilla forces and clandestine militia forces. Previously, the militia and local guerrilla forces had just been relatively unimportant auxiliaries, but now they were to be considered an integral part of the FMLN forces, an important force multiplier. Militias and local guerrillas were to be the first forces to face the army in an offensive, allowing the strategic mobile forces time to concentrate and maneuver for decisive blows. They were to provide intelligence and conduct sabotage in the enemy rear. In addition, they were to join the strategic mobile forces for operations in which larger forces were required.²⁹ The importance placed on the militias was such that when the FMLN began to implement this plan, the ratio of militias to strategic mobile forces was probably 1 to 3. By 1987, the ratio was completely reversed. There were three militia guerrillas for every one member of the strategic mobile forces.³⁰

The militia forces were created to expand the areas of FMLN influence, and particularly desirable targets for this expansion were the cities of El

Salvador. The Salvadoran guerrillas had started as urban guerrilla organizations, so it was odd that they were almost entirely a rural-based organization by 1984. The reason was that the guerrillas had stripped their urban cells in 1980 to form the large guerrilla force necessary for the 1981 Final Offensive. Furthermore, during the 1981 offensive the armed forces had been able to force almost all of the guerrilla elements out of the major cities. As a consequence, the Salvadoran government, under the protection of the armed forces, was able to carry out its political and economic programs nearly unhindered. This became very evident during both the 1982 and the 1984 elections, when the government successfully defended the towns and cities where voting was taking place against guerrilla forces attacking from outside.³¹ Since the majority of Salvadorans lived in or near the cities, it meant that most citizens were now not receiving the political message from the FMLN. Furthermore, the armed forces were able to train and move unhindered in the urban centers, a fact that gave the armed forces a secure base where they could rest, train, and regroup for further military action. The FMLN strategy called for militia units to be formed in the cities to deny this sanctuary to the armed forces and to carry the political message to a broader segment of the population. Using the same tactics as the guerrilla units in the rural areas, the urban militias were to conduct pinprick operations against military targets in the cities. Snipers, mines, and ambushes were the order of the day. After each operation, the urban militias were to disappear into the urban jungle the same way that rural guerrillas melted silently back into the hills and trees of the rural areas.³²

The urban militias were to enhance another aspect of the new plan. Recognizing its mistaken belief in 1981 that the masses would rise in insurrection without any political organization or direction, the FMLN now made plans to create and orchestrate mass organizations that would covertly serve as fronts for the FMLN political plan. These fronts would avoid openly allying themselves with the FMLN in order to attract those people with similar political beliefs who were afraid to have anything to do with something that smacked of the guerrillas. Even though these organizations would be essentially fronts for the guerrillas, all ties to the guerrillas would be categorically denied and carefully hidden to maintain their legal status. Maintaining a facade of legality was the priority for these mass fronts, to prevent the military from taking any action against them.³³ The group of "legal mass organizations" that secretly carried out the agenda of the FMLN was known as "Double Faced Popular Power."³⁴ Part of the plan for Double Faced Popular Power was to further infiltrate already existing labor and mass organizations. The FMLN set out to infiltrate its cadres into controlling positions within the legitimate labor unions and organizations. These cadres were assigned the task of attempting to draw these organizations closer to the political position of

the FMLN, and if they could, incite the organizations to carry out protests, marches, and so on, that would coincide with FMLN goals and objectives.³⁵

Essentially, the whole idea of Double Faced Popular Power was the old RN line of thought that had been the cause of so much disagreement and blood before the factions joined to form the FMLN. The FMLN began to realize that without organization and direction, people would rarely act spontaneously to support a political cause, and that it was equally rare for such spontaneous support to be effective. The people had to be organized, experienced, and led, to prepare them for the insurrection.

The second element of the strategy to demoralize the armed forces and the Salvadoran government was the campaign of economic sabotage. In the same manner that they were to conduct guerrilla actions against the armed forces, the FMLN units were to carry out sabotage against the highways, bridges, telephones, electrical power, harvests, industries, and other economic, communications, and transportation networks and infrastructure of the country. Spectacular destruction of these elements was to be carried out if it could succeed, but the meat of the strategy was for the guerrilla units, particularly the local guerrilla and militia units, to carry out multiple small acts of sabotage on a regular basis. While any one action was not bound to be catastrophic, the sum total of the actions of numerous units would represent a substantial economic drain.³⁶ While the armed forces could protect part of these resources, they could not hope to cover all of them with the forces at hand, and could do even less if they planned to continue their offensives against the guerrilla forces. The armed forces would be faced with the constant dilemma of choosing its priorities. They could stretch their forces to protect the national infrastructure, but this would make the units vulnerable to attack by the guerrillas. On the other hand, they could concentrate their forces to fight the guerrillas, but this would allow the guerrillas freedom to attack the economy.

The FMLN plan was insidious. The destruction of the economy and the infrastructure would have a profound impact on the social conditions of the population. The people would blame their new social problems on the government. Mass organizations would publicly and visibly protest against the government in an attempt to radicalize the masses. The newly radicalized masses would provide recruits for the urban guerrillas and the mass organizations to perpetuate more protest, destruction, and sabotage. The FMLN had created a strategy that would grow and feed on itself, a functional, perpetual motion machine.³⁷

The strategy developed at the 1985 meeting was implemented between mid-1985 and early 1988. The net effect was that high-intensity combat of the earlier period diminished greatly and was replaced by the grind of authentic, low-intensity combat. Combat was primarily between less-than-

company-strength elements, with few casualties. Where the majority of wounds and deaths for the armed forces had previously been caused by rifle fire, now most were inflicted with mines and other explosive devices. The mines in particular were very aggravating to the armed forces because they severely hampered operations. It was not uncommon in the early part of this period for an army battalion to suffer nine or ten casualties from mines in the first fifteen to thirty minutes of an operation.³⁸ This type of casualty rate bogged down operations because the mines maimed and wounded the soldiers rather than killing them, and the evacuation of the wounded could often tie up most of the helicopter assets assigned to an operation. Initially, the new tactics of the FMLN were extremely demoralizing to the armed forces, particularly because the result was a large number of maimed young men with missing feet, legs, hands, and eyes. At the conclusion of the war, the armed forces alone had over five thousand mine amputees on their rolls.³⁹ The military tried to maintain morale by assigning these men administrative duties in the army bases and shops. Going to any administrative division of the armed forces was like walking into the handicapped ward of a rehab center. This was the only place that these men could work and be as efficient as the personnel with no handicaps. Now the armed forces is facing the difficult task of reincorporating these men into the civilian workplace.

However, not only the military, but civilians also, were victims of mines. For every two soldiers that stepped on mines, it was estimated that one civilian was wounded, maimed, or killed by them.⁴⁰ Mine warfare produced so many casualties that one of El Salvador's major challenges today, after the war, is to find ways of taking care of and finding gainful employment for the significant percentage of young people that were wounded by mines during the war.

The "new" harassing and hit-and-run tactics were also initially demoralizing, as the soldiers had been accustomed to pitched battles with the subversives. Most of the combat now was with an enemy that was rarely seen until the firing broke out, and when it did, the clashes were short, sharp, and fierce, stopping as abruptly as they had started.

However, while mines continued to be a problem throughout the remainder of the conflict, the armed forces learned to adjust their tactics to the tactics of the guerrillas, within the overall framework of the FMLN strategy. The elite units, such as the Parachute Battalion and the Immediate Reaction Battalions, quickly adjusted to the new methods of warfare, and developed their own tactics to counter those of the FMLN. While the guerrillas were able to maintain their influence on the traditional strongholds, they were not able to expand their influence much beyond the areas they already were disputing with the government. The guerrillas were more successful with two other elements of their new strategy. The first was the sabotage campaign. The military had always deployed to protect the major

harvests, particularly the coffee harvest in western El Salvador. In this manner, they had managed to preserve most of the nation's agricultural export market. However, in the new campaign, not only were the harvests targeted, but the entire infrastructure that supported the harvests. It was impossible to adequately protect all of this infrastructure with the resources at hand. Particularly vulnerable were the electrical energy and communications networks. Throughout the war, the guerrillas continually knocked down energy towers and telephone poles. The government telephone company and electrical companies became experts at repairing the damage in record time. They were so expert that foreign countries with similar terrorist threats began to import Salvadoran advisers to demonstrate their technique. However, even though the Salvadorans were expert repairmen, the costs of continually repairing these networks was a heavy drain on the economy, and a constant nuisance to the population, as there were frequent blackouts and telephone disconnections.

The FMLN attempted to stop the national transportation network by taking over the roads. The guerrillas declared numerous national transportation stoppages, where they proclaimed that any vehicle on the roads was a fair military target. On the specified day, the guerrillas would come out onto the highways and stop every vehicle that passed by. Almost without exception the occupants were made to dismount the vehicle, and the vehicles were then confiscated or burned. The Salvadoran military challenged the FMLN and was able to win the struggle for control of the roads. This was done through the "Caminante" Plan. Under this plan, the armed forces protected the road network with armored cavalry patrols and air patrols of helicopter gunships. Furthermore, the military provided ground transportation to workers in San Salvador to guarantee the uninterrupted progress of the economy. However, while the armed forces were able to wrest permanent control of the roads from the FMLN, they were not able to prevent the FMLN from launching periodic incursions against this network. Over the course of the war, nearly every bridge in El Salvador was destroyed at least once. As with the energy towers and telephone poles, the Salvadorans became experts in rapidly replacing blown bridges with Bailey bridges. However, the combination of diverted resources to carry out the repairs and lost income from disrupted markets was draining. So, while the FMLN was not able to stop the Salvadoran economy from functioning, the monthly costs of destroyed bridges, energy towers, telephone poles, vehicles, and so on added up to debilitating totals. From 1981 to 1991, the United States gave El Salvador three billion dollars in economic aid. Instead of helping the economy grow, U.S. aid, used to repair all of the damage caused by FMLN sabotage, was only enough to keep the economy in stasis.

The second success of the FMLN's new strategy was in the organization of mass fronts. Since 1980, the Salvadoran government had made signif-

icant political progress toward democracy. At this time, the military had turned over control of the country to José Napoleon Duarte, the civilian head of the main opposition party, the Christian Democrats. In 1982, El Salvador held free elections for the first time, to vote in a general assembly to write a new constitution. Even though the guerrillas boycotted the elections and threatened anyone who voted in these elections with death, over 80 percent of the electorate turned out for the vote. In 1984, new elections were held for a civilian president, and subsequently many democratic reforms were implemented. Among those was the legal right to organize opposition political groups. The FMLN took advantage of this legal right and formed numerous mass fronts to carry its political message to the Salvadoran people. Additionally, it began to infiltrate cadres into the labor unions in an attempt to co-opt these into unwitting participation in the FMLN plan. As long as these mass fronts maintained a facade of independence from the guerrillas, and acts of war could not be directly traced to the mass front, the Salvadoran government could not do anything against them. In addition, there were U.S. congressmen who were heavily influenced by the pro-FMLN human rights lobby in the United States, which had direct links to the mass fronts.⁴¹ The sum total of these congressmen was enough to seriously curtail or cut off military and economic aid to El Salvador, aid which the government desperately needed to continue to prosecute the war, but which was as important if not more so in keeping the economy afloat. Unless there was impeccable evidence against an organization or its cadre (and often even when there was), the police and military forces were not allowed to act against the mass fronts. Because of Salvadoran dependence on U.S. aid and the new climate of political freedom in El Salvador, the FMLN was able to organize numerous mass fronts virtually unhindered. The only obstacle that impeded the FMLN was the fact that only a very small proportion of the Salvadoran people joined these organizations.

THE ESCALATION OF ATTRITION IN PREPARATION FOR THE STRATEGIC COUNTER-OFFENSIVE, PLAN FUEGO

By the end of 1987, there was general malaise in El Salvador. The civilian government of the Christian Democrats elected in 1984 had turned out to be much more incompetent and corrupt than the military governments that had preceded it. Furthermore, on top of the war, El Salvador had suffered a terrible earthquake in October 1986 that had nearly sunk the economy. The military had been forced to divert a great number of its resources to assist in the reparations of the damage from this natural disaster, and in the process was not able to sustain its offensives against the guerrillas. This gave the FMLN a much-needed respite

to reorganize and to make sure that its forces were consistently applying the new tactics of the attrition strategy.

By the end of 1987, discontent with the government was fairly widespread. The FMLN interpreted this to mean that the Salvadoran people were recognizing the "failure" to democratize the country, and the failure of the U.S.-assisted counter-insurgency plan, and were again on the brink of insurrection.⁴² The guerrilla high command met again to adjust its strategy to accelerate preparations for what it called the "Strategic Counter-Offensive." The Strategic Counter-Offensive was the conceptual military goal of the FMLN. It would be a nationwide military offensive, along the lines of the offensive launched in 1981, that would precipitate the fall of the government by inciting the people to insurrection. However, unlike the 1981 offensive, the FMLN would be much better prepared. The code name for the accelerated strategy to bring about the Strategic Counter-Offensive was "Plan Fuego."

According to captured FMLN documents, the guerrillas felt that while there was a serious political crisis and disillusionment with the democratically elected government, this political crisis had not provoked a similar one among the armed forces. The goal of the FMLN in Plan Fuego was to bring about the military crisis while maintaining the political crisis. The Strategic Counter-Offensive had to be launched when there was a real power vacuum. Only by creating a military crisis, simultaneous with the political crisis, could enough of a power vacuum open up to be filled by the FMLN offensive.⁴³ The goal of the FMLN was to "strategically" harass the armed forces. Where it had been launching major assaults every six to eight months, it now hoped to launch a major strike on a monthly basis. The FMLN recognized that it did not have the forces to do this, and decided to use smaller forces on more politically significant targets. Since the most visible targets were in the cities, the FMLN strategy called for more urban operations, especially those of a highly visible nature. Not only would installations be targeted, but also the military and political leadership of the nation.⁴⁴ The FMLN called for its urban cadres to carry out a terrorist war against these targets. They were to use remote-controlled explosives, silenced firearms, car bombs, and snipers to carry out the war against the political and military heads of the government. The strategic mobile forces were to support these efforts by periodically making night incursions into the major cities to temporarily occupy neighborhoods and spread the political message. The purpose of these incursions was to prepare the neighborhoods for the Strategic Counter-Offensive by having them become accustomed to constant guerrilla incursions. The strategic mobile forces were also to increase the rhythm of medium-scale attacks in the countryside against fixed and semipermanent targets. In every attack, the FMLN forces were to make liberal use of "popular (homemade) artillery." As noted before, the FMLN regarded

popular artillery as an important force multiplier, and as a means of simplifying the logistical system.

As mentioned earlier, the ratio of militia to strategic mobile forces was about 3 to 1. With a military crisis in sight, the FMLN feared that the militias would not be ready for the offensive when the time came. To remedy this, the strategic mobile forces were to concentrate their efforts on providing intensive military training to the militias, and blooding them in their first operations. Militia forces were to accompany regular forces on every operation. Special forces (FES) training was to be given to militia units. Regular FES units were to be increased and expanded.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, the mass fronts were to increase their political activity. Protests and marches were to become more confrontational and violent. The FMLN cadres were to do everything in their power to incite revolutionary fervor and hatred of the government. An active campaign was to be carried out, accusing the government and military of human rights abuses to elicit the international condemnation of the Salvadoran regime. The ultimate goal was to get the U.S. Congress to cut off aid to the government. The loss of the military's source of money and support, it was felt, would provoke the desired military crisis.⁴⁶

All through 1988, the FMLN carried out its new strategic campaign to accelerate the conditions for the Strategic Counter-Offensive. This was particularly evident in the urban centers. The urban guerrillas began to conduct a campaign of unprecedented violence and terrorism. Numerous attacks with popular artillery were carried out against the urban military installations. However, these bore little fruit, as popular artillery was too inaccurate for urban conditions. Most of the projectiles fell on civilians. The urban commandos were able to assassinate only several minor government figures. While the FMLN was successful in creating a climate of insecurity, it was not able to decapitate either the political or military leadership of the government. More important, rather than winning people over, the result was that most Salvadorans were angered by the increased atmosphere of terrorism and turned against the FMLN. Perhaps because of this, the strategic mobile forces were never really able to make incursions into the urban neighborhoods. The overwhelming political shift away from the Christian Democrats was not to the Left, but rather to the Right. It was the ARENA party, and not the FMLN, that turned out to be the big winner in El Salvador.⁴⁷ Although discontentment with the Christian Democrats did send some people into the arms of the FMLN, the increase in radicalized masses was nothing compared to the overwhelming increased popularity of ARENA. However, the FMLN failed to accept this reality. It interpreted the coming of ARENA to power in the 1989 elections as a sign that things were so desperate that the military was willing to work with a political party with a negative international image in a final bid to break the advance of the guerrilla strategy. The FMLN would not accept that the ARENA party could have majority pop-

ular support. It attributed ARENA's electoral victories to voting fraud and manipulation of the data. It pointed to the relatively low voter turnout in 1989, 66 percent, as compared to 80 percent in 1982 and 1984, and claimed that this was due to repression. In the FMLN's deluded mind these events indicated that the conditions for the Strategic Counter-Offensive were almost ideal.

THE STRATEGIC COUNTER-OFFENSIVE AND PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

The Strategic Counter-Offensive, known as "Until the Limit," began on November 11, 1989. It was the strongest and best organized offensive ever launched by the FMLN. There were several components to the strategic plan. The first was the complete rearming of the FMLN. In the early 1980s, the FMLN had been able to acquire weapons manufactured by Western nations. Now the supply of these weapons was becoming rare and more expensive. The FMLN decided that it would completely reequip its forces with Soviet-bloc weapons (a more thorough discussion is found later in this book). The FMLN was able to cover the infusion of the Soviet-made weapons by claiming that they had been purchased from corrupt members of the U.S.-backed Contra forces in Nicaragua. The United States provided Soviet-made weapons to the Contras fighting against the Sandinista government so that their equipment would be compatible with the equipment given to the Sandinistas by the Soviet government. The fiction of Contra sales to the FMLN not only provided the guerrillas with a cover story; it helped the Sandinistas in Nicaragua by making the Contras look bad in the international community.⁴⁸

The FMLN shipped in massive quantities of Soviet-designed weapons. Some shipments were so massive that, in a single raid, the Salvadoran government captured the largest haul of the war. Over three hundred AK-type rifles and one million rounds of ammunition were captured in a covert warehouse in San Salvador. As implied by this capture, the FMLN prepositioned a large number of these weapons in the neighborhoods it planned to occupy during the offensive. These were cached to arm the masses who, it was anticipated, would join in the insurrection.

A second aspect of the offensive was that, rather than attack the barracks and military installations directly, the FMLN planned to occupy the neighborhoods on the outskirts of San Salvador. The FMLN had come to the conclusion that it was not going to defeat the armed forces in battles of annihilation. Rather, the armed forces would collapse when they were forced to face the political contradictions of the government. While urban guerrillas launched covering attacks against the major installations with popular artillery, the strategic mobile force units moved in and occupied the popular neighborhoods. This had several purposes. First, since these were the peripheral neighborhoods of each city, it would effectively lay

siege to the government forces within each city. The FMLN guerrillas were to attempt to hold the neighborhoods at all costs, and gradually expand their perimeters inward until they controlled all of a given city.

Second, rather than encourage the populace to join the insurrection from a distance, the strategic mobile forces would mix in with the population from the start and carry out active programs to organize them, willing or not, for the insurrection. Third, FMLN forces mixed in directly with the population would force the military to commit massacres of civilians. The massacres would only incite the people to join the FMLN, and once enough people had joined the FMLN, the armed forces would collapse.

To assist this collapse, the urban commandos were also to carry out a campaign to assassinate specific government figures. On the target list were the high command of the armed forces, the president of the Republic, and several other important government and military figures. The assassinations of these persons was to be carried out simultaneously with the harassment and covering attacks carried out against the main armed forces installations. Five cities were targeted for the offensive: San Salvador, Santa Ana, San Miguel, La Union, and Usulután.

The offensive was to be accompanied by mass protests and rebellion of the mass fronts, a national strike, and the mass desertion of soldiers from the armed forces.

As in the 1981 offensive, the FMLN greatly overestimated its popular support. The mass fronts failed to act, and only small numbers of the hard-core activists openly joined the FMLN guerrillas during the intense fighting. The residents of the neighborhoods occupied by the FMLN failed to cooperate with the guerrilla forces. While some people did help the guerrillas, particularly in the first hours when military action had not yet commenced, most of the people fled their homes and went over to government lines when they had the chance. Instead of committing great massacres of civilians, the armed forces were able to pinpoint and locate guerrilla forces within the urban landscape. Against these targets they were able to concentrate heavy fire with surgical precision. While some material damage was incurred, the armed forces were successful in keeping this to a minimum.

While the covering attacks were largely successful in the sense that they gave the FMLN enough time to set up its fortified neighborhoods, the assassination teams completely failed to knock out even a single target of the military or political leadership.

From a military standpoint, the FMLN offensive was a complete failure. Politically, the offensive was more successful. In many ways, the "Until the Limit" offensive paralleled the Vietcong Tet Offensive of 1968. Although the Tet Offensive had ended in failure and completely exhausted the resources of the Vietcong, it galvanized the American public's feeling against the war. In the same way, American public opinion began to turn

against the Salvadoran government.⁴⁹ This was particularly true after the murder of six Jesuit priests during the offensive by renegade elements of the Salvadoran armed forces who were convinced that the Jesuits were the intellectual authors of the offensive. The political victory that had eluded the FMLN due to military and political failure on the battlefield was now handed to the guerrillas on a platter by a few very shortsighted men. The institutional changes and international image that the Salvadoran army had carefully developed over the course of the war were shattered to pieces by the irrational act of a few members of that force. In the eyes of the international community, the Salvadoran military suffered a total loss of credibility.

The FMLN saw a new opportunity for gains and made new strategic adjustments. The new strategy of the FMLN was based again on the lessons learned from Vietnam. This was the strategy known as "Talk, Talk, Fight, Fight." Under pressure from the international community, the Salvadoran government began negotiations with the FMLN. The U.S. Congress, angered by the Jesuit murders, cut aid to El Salvador by 50 percent. This put the Salvadoran military in a seriously disadvantageous position, because although it had sufficient resources to prosecute the war in the short run, it did not have enough to continue the war for a prolonged period of time. The FMLN sensed this, and seized the opportunity to gain the advantage on the negotiating table. According to captured documents, the FMLN considered that its primary obstacle to taking power had always been, and continued to be, the armed forces. The FMLN recognized that it was not in a position to challenge the military on the battlefield, but the new political situation and the negotiations would allow the FMLN to make great gains against the armed forces without firing a single bullet. The FMLN would use the negotiations to make greater political and military gains than it ever could on the battlefield. The intention was to never accept turning over its weapons. Rather, the FMLN was prepared to negotiate its way to a position of advantage and then launch a last, final offensive.⁵⁰

Recognizing that the ARENA government was under a lot of pressure, the FMLN would follow a two-track strategy. It would sit at the negotiating table and make demands, and if the government didn't meet its demands, it would threaten to launch offensives. It felt that in this way it could, in a relatively short period of time, gain most of its political and military objectives. In 1990, on the anniversary of the previous year's offensive, the FMLN launched a second offensive in Chalatenango. By attacking military positions in Chalatenango, it attempted to bully the government into making political concessions more quickly. However, the offensive was only partially successful, and there was another grave problem for the FMLN. It was now also fighting against time.

The people of Nicaragua had recently voted the FMLN's main allies,

the Sandinistas, out of political power. However, the Sandinistas remained in control of the military. This was the concession made by the new government to keep the peace. While there is evidence that some Sandinistas continued to support the FMLN, they could no longer provide this support openly. This greatly hampered FMLN logistics. Meanwhile, perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet Union were casting grave doubts on continued aid from the Soviet Union to Cuba as well. This aid had kept the Cuban government going for 30 years, and was one of the main reasons why Castro could dedicate so much effort to supporting revolutionary efforts around the globe. The Cubans called it "International Solidarity." The Fall 1991 democracy revolution in Russia effectively brought an end to aid to Cuba. In view of this, it is no surprise that in January of 1992 the final peace accords to end the Salvadoran war were signed.

While the FMLN did gain several important concessions, including some modifications to the Salvadoran constitution that were written into law unconstitutionally, the FMLN was not able to negotiate a reduction in the armed forces without also signing an agreement to give up all of its weapons. The members of the armed forces on the government negotiating team proved to be tough and able negotiators. While the FMLN extracted a humiliating purge of officers accused of human-rights abuses by an independent truth commission, and a 50 percent reduction in military forces, it had to disband completely as a military organization. The FMLN demanded the formation of a neutral police force not linked to any side in the war. The apparent intention of the FMLN was to co-opt this force, and in essence establish a parallel armed force to the Salvadoran military. However, the armed forces negotiators saw through this maneuver and demanded stringent controls on who could join the new police force, and the training curriculum. The development of this force is still in progress.

The FMLN attempted to fool the United Nations by only turning over a small portion of its weapons at demobilization, but the interception of several small-arms shipments to the FMLN after the signing of the peace accords, and an embarrassing accident in Managua, Nicaragua, forced the FMLN to be more forthright, and cost them significant international and national political support. In 1993, a bomb exploded in a residential zone in Managua. The explosion uncovered a large arms cache containing thousands of Soviet-designed weapons. Fearing retribution, the Sandinistas quickly identified the owners of the arsenal as the FMLN guerrillas. The FMLN was forced to turn over a much greater quantity of weapons, and to finally give up its plans for political power through the force of arms. The Salvadoran government still estimates that the FMLN has failed to turn in at least three thousand AK-47 rifles and some SAM missiles, demonstrating that the FMLN's claim to have turned in everything cannot

be trusted.⁵¹ These weapons are a major worry, as they can be easily used to destabilize the region if they are sold to the insurgent movements in Guatemala or Mexico. There is always the possibility that they could be used again in El Salvador by dissident groups that are still organized in some areas of the country.

Today the FMLN is a legal political party that enjoys its full rights in El Salvador. In the March 1994 elections, the FMLN won important local electoral victories. Around twenty of the former guerrilla commanders are now members of the Salvadoran National Assembly. This constitutes the largest single opposition party in the Salvadoran legislature. While the FMLN cannot block the majority party legislation by itself, in concert with the other opposition parties it can force many concessions. In the presidential elections the FMLN was rejected 69 percent to 23 percent. While the FMLN has gained important political power, it is still overwhelmingly rejected by the Salvadoran people. This rejection by the majority of Salvadorans has been the one thing that the FMLN has never accepted, and never realized. Majority support was the one ingredient that FMLN war strategy always lacked. Because of this, the Salvadoran military, while taking its share of hard knocks, was always, in the end, able to frustrate guerrilla aspirations.

SUMMARY

In summary, to clarify the strategy that was developed by the FMLN over a period of twelve years of armed conflict, it is important to indicate that the operational changes in the insurgent strategy were directly catalyzed by the East-West conflict, which provided the resources for continual military escalation. The FMLN, without any doubt, was the best militarily developed insurgent movement in the history of the American continent. Not only did it apply the lessons of such conflicts as Vietnam, Angola, Rhodesia, and others, it also was provided with modern weaponry from individual rifles to ground-to-air missiles. It developed a sophisticated communication net and secret codes that gave it a greater command and control ability. This also allowed it to develop an efficient logistical apparatus, which sustained the organization throughout the course of the war. As has been stated earlier, the military strategy of Prolonged Popular War went through important changes, a product of the actions of the armed forces. These changes can be summarized as follows:

Organization and Development, 1970–1980

The operative model in this period was guerrilla warfare that basically consisted of the means by which to organize the subversive structure.

Every combat action was oriented toward the organization of the military cadre and the support infrastructure.

Effort to Liberate Territory, 1980–1984

The operative model was the war of movement. This model was based on concepts of regular warfare. During this time, the military side of the insurgent organization was made up of platoons, columns or companies, battalions, and brigades. The strategy of the FMLN during this time was to liberate territory through what it called decisive battles, where the military side of the equation predominated, particularly in the rural areas of the nation. However, at the same time, acts of terrorism in the urban zones also increased. All of the military effort was aimed at liberating territory to support a diplomatic effort to garner support and international recognition for itself as a legitimate belligerent. During this period, the war in El Salvador reached its operational peak. The units which faced each other were of large size. At the same time, the Salvadoran armed forces reached their peak in terms of growth and professional development. The armed forces were able to neutralize the brigade- and battalion-size elements of the FMLN. The units that resulted from the changes in the armed forces were the Immediate Reaction Battalions such as the Atlacatl, Belloso, Atonal, Arce, and the Bracamonte. These units, in conjunction with the Parachute Battalion and the Special Operations Group, were the key units that frustrated the FMLN battle plan of maneuver warfare during this period.

War of Attrition, 1985–1989

After the armed forces neutralized the large units of the FMLN, the FMLN rethought its war plan within Prolonged Popular War and basically adopted attrition warfare. The main targets of this strategy were the army soldiers and the most important national economic zones. Attrition warfare consisted largely of mine warfare in which the massive use of explosives caused an unprecedented development of homemade weaponry, which was within the means of any guerrilla and militia unit. These weapons became a force multiplier in both the rural and the urban areas. To develop this operational change, the FMLN implemented what it called the “Strategic Dispersion,” with the objective of diminishing the great number of casualties the armed forces had been inflicting. Battalions and brigades dispersed into platoon-size units in the areas of greatest guerrilla persistence. During this time, peace talks were more frequent, but were used as a diversionary tactic to allow the rebuilding and rearming of the guerrillas with weapons that caused even greater escalation. Such was the case with the acquisition of ground-to-air SA-7 and SA-14 missiles, weap-

ons that curbed the use of the Salvadoran air force and army mobility. At the end of this period, the FMLN launched the long-awaited Strategic Counter-Offensive, "Until the Limit," with the objective of winning a significant victory. However, this offensive was contained by the ability of the armed forces, but especially because of the lack of popular support.

Peace Negotiations, 1990–1992

This period was characterized by the search for a negotiated settlement to finally end the conflict. This was motivated by the lack of popular support and because of the effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the failure of the Soviet Union. The loss of credibility of the Communist model took away the ideological foundation of the Salvadoran revolutionary movement. Notwithstanding, during this time period the FMLN continued its military actions using the concept of concentration and deconcentration; that is, rapid concentration to attack an isolated target, and immediate dispersion after the action to avoid the army reaction. This period was also characterized by the increase in sabotage of the national economy and the illegal occupation of property, and an increase in kidnappings and other terrorist acts.

Despite all of the FMLN's strategic adjustments, it was never able to carry out its dream of a violent revolutionary triumph and total control of the state. Since January 1992, El Salvador has been involved in a peace process that, despite its ups and downs, seems to be running comparatively smoothly. The guerrillas have gained real political power and are a significant political force. However, they remain a minority, a position that took them twelve years of bloodshed to finally recognize.

NOTES

1. Interview with a high-ranking FMLN defector, San Salvador, March 1990. This person helped organize one of the front groups in the United States. The identities of both the guerrillas and the army personnel interviewed for this book shall remain anonymous in order to protect them. Assassinations of revenge for events during the war are still being carried out in El Salvador.

2. Gabriel Zaid, "Enemy Colleagues: A Reading of the Salvadoran Tragedy," *Dissent* (Winter 1982).

3. Interview with high-ranking guerrilla who defected to the government side, San Salvador, June 1991.

4. Zaid, "Enemy Colleagues."

5. DRU, *Plan de Guerra 1 de la Fase I* (El Salvador, November 18, 1980).

6. FMLN, *Informe y Análisis Visto Desde el Exterior* (Nicaragua, March 11–13, 1981), captured from guerrillas in 1981.

7. This estimate is based on interviews with several former guerrillas who were trained in Cuba and Nicaragua. Their identities must remain anonymous.

8. Same as note 7.

9. These members were part of the South American guerrilla umbrella organization known as the Junta Coordinadora Revolucionaria (JCR). This information was taken from an interview with a high-level FMLN defector who received special forces training in Cuba, was stationed in Nicaragua with the "International Brigades," and then came to El Salvador. He defected from the guerrillas shortly after the failed offensive.

10. Council for Inter-American Security, *Recorded Statements of Captured Terrorist Julián Ignacio Otero Espinosa* (Washington, D.C., n. d.).

11. FMLN, *Plan Puente* (El Salvador, 1980), captured from guerrillas in 1981.

12. Marco Antonio Grande, "Estrategia Militar del FMLN," *Análisis* 2 (1990): 56-62.

13. FPL, *Sobre la Situación Actual* (El Salvador, February 22, 1981).

14. Same as note 13.

15. Grande, "Estrategia Militar del FMLN," pp. 56-62.

16. Interview with high-ranking guerrilla defector of the FAL, 1990.

17. Interview with high-ranking FPL defector, San Salvador, July 1990.

18. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN: Reunión Comandancia Mayo-Junio Morazán 1985* (El Salvador: Editorial Revolucionaria del Pueblo Ernesto Amaya Sistema Venceremos FMLN, 1986), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

19. Joachim Maitre, "The Subsiding War in El Salvador," *Strategic Review* (Winter 1985): 22-29.

20. James Kelley et al., "Trouble on Two Fronts: El Salvador's Guerrillas Make Progress as Right-wing Violence Increases," *Time* (December 12, 1983): 32-35.

21. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

22. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

23. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

24. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

25. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

26. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

27. Joaquin Villalobos, *Por Qué Lucha El FMLN?* (Morazan: Ediciones Sistema Radio Venceremos, September 1983).

28. Joaquin Villalobos, *The War in El Salvador* (San Francisco: Solidarity Publications, 1986).

29. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

30. Intelligence estimate of the Salvadoran armed forces.

31. Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, *El Salvador at War: An Oral History* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1988).

32. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

33. Marco Antonio Grande, "Frente de Masas," *Análisis* (January 1989).

34. FMLN, *Poder Popular Doble Cara: Lineamientos de Organización* (El Salvador: Publicaciones FMLN, January 1987), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

35. Grande, "Frente de Masas."

36. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

37. FMLN, *Línea Militar del FMLN*.

38. Interview with a Salvadoran officer, San Salvador, 1990.

39. Interview with General Juan Orlando Zepeda, Vice Minister of Defense, San Salvador, June 1992.

40. Cancillería de El Salvador, *Reportaje Sobre Las Minas* (San Salvador, 1987).

41. J. Michael Waller, *Third Current of Revolution: Inside the "North American Front" of El Salvador's Guerrilla War* (New York: University Press of America, 1991).

42. FMLN, *Documento Sobre Concepción Militar* (El Salvador, 1987?), captured from guerrillas in 1987.

43. Comandancia General FMLN, *La Ofensiva Estratégica* (El Salvador, 1987), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

44. Comandancia General FMLN, *La Ofensiva Estratégica* (El Salvador, 1987), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

45. FMLN, *Documento Sobre Concepción Militar* (El Salvador, 1987?), captured from guerrillas in 1987.

46. Grande, "Frente de Masas."

47. The Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party was founded in 1980 by retired Major Roberto D'Aubisson in reaction to the 1979 coup. D'Aubisson founded the party to counter what he saw as a takeover of the government by Communist co-opted elements, particularly the Christian Democrats, which he accused of being like a watermelon: "green on the outside and red on the inside." The ARENA party attracted much of El Salvador's business and middle-class. However, it also attracted a large following among Salvadoran peasants who were against the FMLN.

48. Jack Calhoun, "Bush Uses Ploy to Win Contra Aid," *The Guardian*, June 7, 1989, p. 9. Also see Douglas Farah, "Salvadoran Rebels See Wider War," *The Washington Post*, February 26, 1989, pp. A1, A34.

49. Lt. Col. Charles L. Armstrong, USMC, "Urban Combat: The FMLN's Final Offensive of 1989," *Marine Corps Gazette* (November 1990): 52–58.

50. Javier Rojas, *Javier Rojas Documents*. Nicaraguan guerrilla Javier Rojas' personal papers, taken from his dead body after he was ambushed in 1991.

51. Interview with Salvadoran officer, Washington, D.C., September 1993; Armstrong, "Urban Combat," pp. 52–58.

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General Organization of the Insurgent Movement in El Salvador

THE WAR FRONTS OF THE FMLN

From the foundation of the FMLN, the high command found it administratively essential to divide the country into different regions for purposes of command and control. Each front was divided along recognized political and geographical lines. In this case, by department or departments. In El Salvador, a department is the equivalent of a U.S. state, although, as El Salvador is much smaller, departments are about the size of some U.S. counties. The five fronts, as generally conceived by the FMLN (see Figure 1), were the following:

1. The Feliciano Ama Western Front. This front included the departments of Ahuachapán, Sonsonate, and Santa Ana, the richest agricultural area of the nation. While some of the heaviest fighting took place on this front during the early part of the war, from 1982 on it was relatively quiet. The guerrillas used it as an area to rest and retrain units; however, it was too far away from the main routes of supply.
2. The Modesto Ramírez Central Front. This included the departments of La Libertad, La Paz, San Salvador, Cabañas, and Chalatenango. This was a very important region for the RN and the FPL, but contained far fewer guerrillas than the remainder of the organizations. It was also the zone that contained the highest concentration of armed forces troops clustered around the capital. Guerrilla units were clustered around a corridor of hills, volcanoes, and mountains from the north to the south. This included the mountains of northern Chalatenango, Guazapa Mountain, and finally the San Salvador volcano. This range of hills gave the guerrillas a corridor right into the heart of the capital and was one of the most highly contested areas of the war.

Figure 1**The Geographical Division of the Five War Fronts**

3. Anastasio Aquino Para-Central Front. This zone included San Vicente, Cuscatlan, and Cabañas. The guerrillas were spread throughout this area, but the heaviest concentration was in the San Pedro hills of San Vicente. These hills provided a corridor from northeastern El Salvador to the capital, running from the San Vicente volcano to the hills just outside of Zacatecoluca.
4. The Francisco Sanchez Northeastern Front and (5) Francisco Sanchez South-eastern Front. Originally this had just been the Eastern front, but because of its importance was divided into two separate fronts. The northern half consisted of the departments of Morazan and San Miguel. The southern half consisted of the departments of Usulután and La Unión. These two fronts controlled the major infiltration routes into El Salvador, the southeastern front controlled the sea routes from Nicaragua, and the northeastern front controlled the land routes from Honduras. These two fronts were the strongholds of the ERP, and it was because of the ERP's strategic location in terms of controlling the arms infiltration routes that it gained so much dominance within the FMLN. While the agreement was that the arms would be distributed proportionally among the five organizations, the ERP was in charge of reception and distribution. Often, the ERP would keep a much greater portion than its fair share, and when it did distribute the weapons evenly, it always got the first pick.

The FAPL (FPL) organized the fronts somewhat differently:

1. Feliciano Ama Western Front. This covered the same area as the front with the same name used by the ERP.

2. Clara Elizabeth Ramirez Metropolitan Front. This covered the capital and all of the outlying suburbs.
3. Felipe Peña Central Front. This covered the same territory as the Modesto Ramirez front used by the ERP, with the exceptions of the capital and Chalatenango.
4. Apolinario Serrano North Front. This consisted of the department of Chalatenango, and was the most important front of the FPL.
5. Roberto Sibrian Para-Central Front. This front covered the same territory as that of the ERP's Anastacio Aquino Para-Central Front.
6. Aguilar Flor Eastern Front. This covered the entire area of the Francisco Sanchez northeastern and southeastern fronts as used by the ERP.

TACTICAL PURPOSE OF THE WAR FRONTS

The FMLN organized the war fronts to establish administrative and tactical boundaries of responsibility for each of the different armed factions making up the umbrella organization. Even though these fronts established clearly defined boundaries, in no way did the boundaries impede coordinated actions or mutual support with insurgent forces from a different war front. The key is to view the tactical role these divisions played in the expansion of forces, establishment of base camps, logistical deposits, training camps, and tactical operations, all of which were founded in the strategy of Prolonged Popular War.

In terms of expansion of subversive forces, each front included within its boundaries cities, towns, villages, and cantons, in which the civilian sympathizers provided the guerrillas with a ready source of recruits for militias and regular guerrilla cadres. The process involved a period of training and indoctrination by the local guerrillas that operated in that area with the exclusive mission of carrying out a scaled process of training chosen candidates. Initially, recruits would be trained in militia tactics. The best of the militias would be chosen for further training in either local guerrilla or eventually higher force categories.

The program of subversive expansion was perhaps one of the most important elements of the FMLN insurgency, as it was the process by which the insurgent movement survived and grew into an organized movement capable of serious operations. To break up a plan of prolonged popular war, government military units had to place a high priority on countering expansion efforts by showing presence in the areas where guerrilla expansion was most prevalent. It was necessary to carry out civic action programs in addition to supporting the government's development programs aimed at improving the lives of the most needy

civilian population, especially in the most remote areas. This is where guerrilla expansion activities were the heaviest.

The Salvadoran Armed Forces (ESAF) developed a varied number of campaigns with the purpose of alleviating the situation of the most needy families in all of El Salvador. These programs included civic action and medical assistance programs that were the main vehicle by which the Government of El Salvador (GOES) delivered humanitarian aid to the battle zones of the country. The ESAF carried out civic action programs at all levels: as an institution, and at the different unit levels, brigades, detachments, and infantry battalions. These programs greatly reduced the expansion efforts of the insurgents throughout the war fronts, and turned much of the population away from the guerrillas. The net result was that much of the civilian population supported and collaborated with the ESAF.

The organization of the FMLN war fronts also included smaller subzones that were set up to exercise greater control over its own forces. These subzones were given different code names that were frequently changed so that they would be harder for the ESAF to detect. In the subzones, base camps were established which, according to the category of force, could be permanent, semipermanent, or mobile. The area of the base camps constituted the infrastructure of the command, control, and logistical elements of the insurgent forces. At the base camps, training schools were set up, which greatly increased the level of expansion activities and provided reinforcements for the guerrilla cadre. Some of the most important training centers were the ERP school of Torola in Morazan Department of the Francisco Sanchez Northeastern Front, and the FPL's San Fernando school in Chalatenango Department of the Modesto Ramirez Central Front. These schools were semipermanent structures within the fronts, set up to provide political and military training to the new guerrilla cadres that were recruited within the front. Most of the recruiting was done by force or induction.

It is important to mention that the organization of the fronts was closely related to the logistical efforts required to provide for the needs of the entire organization. There were subzones that were separately tasked with producing grains, fishing, or harvesting fruit. However, one of the main means of support for each of the fronts was the collecting of war taxes from the population. The FMLN insurgent movement could not survive without logistical support, and for this reason the armed forces had to make an effort to place government troops in the areas from which the guerrillas obtained their supplies. This forced the guer-

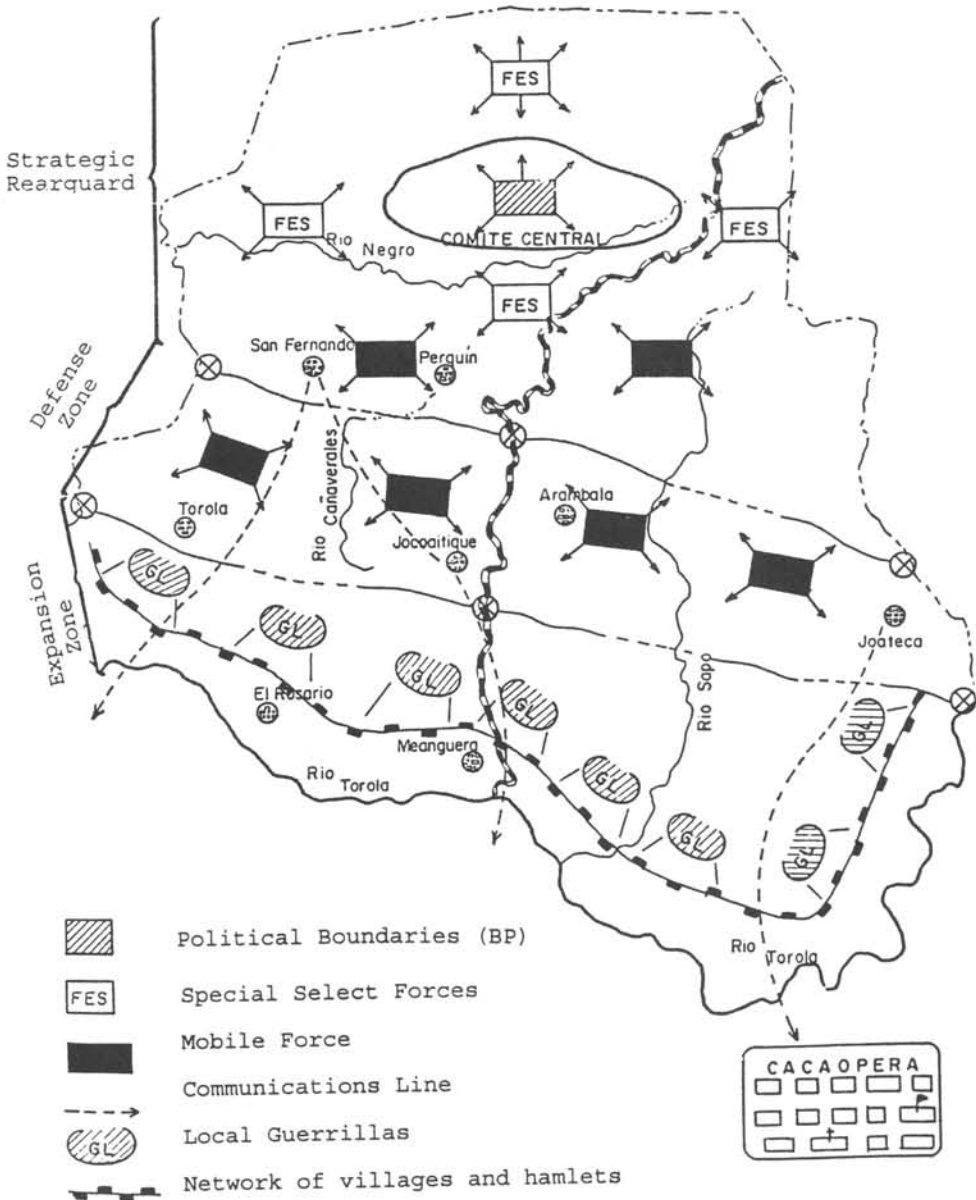
rillas to seek their supplies elsewhere, and consequently increased their vulnerability.

ORGANIZATION OF THE OPERATIONS AREA

In the zones of greatest FMLN influence, the guerrillas organized their different force categories and gave them specific functions within the zone. Most of these functions specified what different categories were to do in the face of offensive army operations, and gave the different force categories different tasks to carry out for the maintenance and growth of the organization. Each category of force, including special forces, strategic mobile forces, local guerrilla units, and the clandestine militias had very distinct and specific tasks to carry out in order to ensure the continued survival of the organization as a whole. While in the early years there were differences in the organization of areas of influence from faction to faction, by mid-war the shared experience and increased cooperation among the factions was such that each organization distributed its forces in a similar manner throughout each front. The emphasis was on the protection of the command structure and the organization of what the guerrillas called the "strategic rearguard." The guerrillas learned that without a command structure, the organization could not function. Therefore, the protection of the command elements had a much higher priority than the safety of guerrilla units and civilian supporters. The FMLN could always rebuild its units in a fairly short time. However, if the command structures were destroyed, they would take years to recover. The strategic rearguard consisted of those areas of influence closest to the Honduran border in Morazan and Chalatenango. Because of the high concentration of guerrilla forces in these areas, the guerrillas enjoyed a greater degree of control in these regions. While the armed forces could, and did, enter these areas at will, it was always in force and with the expectation of combat and casualties. Because of this, the guerrillas used these areas for rest, training, and to set up forward resupply caches. In summary then, the structure of the different forces within the guerrilla zones of influence was such that they could provide the maximum level of protection to the command and logistics infrastructures of the organization. The FMLN considered it far more difficult to rebuild these two elements within the organization than to recruit new troops to rebuild battered or destroyed units.

The guerrillas divided their areas of influence into tiered zones. These were (1) the expansion zones, (2) the defense zones, and (3) the strategic rearguard zones (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Organization of the Operations Area of the Morazan Zone (ERP)



EXPANSION ZONES, DEFENSE ZONES, AND STRATEGIC REARGUARD ZONES

Expansion Zones

The expansion zones were the fringe areas of the guerrilla zones of influence, and of vital importance to the FMLN. These areas were where militia and masses were recruited and developed, and were the areas of operation of the local guerrilla units. They constituted the base of support for the guerrillas and served to provide recruits and replacements for the guerrilla cadres. In addition, they were the areas from which the guerrillas generally obtained their food, clothing, and other basic-needs items. These were areas of high conflict, as they were disputed over with the government and the Salvadoran army. As the outer shell of the zones of influence, these were where the first security measures were taken to protect the rear areas of each war front. Government forces crossing into these zones would set off a chain of predetermined drills to ensure the safeguarding of the more important elements deeper inside the zones. The forces that were responsible for beginning the drills and controlling the expansion zones were the local guerrilla units.

Subordinate to the local guerrillas were the militias and masses, who assisted the local guerrillas in their activities. The local guerrillas were responsible for the organization, recruitment, and training of the clandestine militias for all of the support activities.

The militias in the expansion zones served several purposes. First, through the process of "fogueo," the best members of the militia became members of guerrilla units (the process of recruitment and fogueo will be described later in the book). Second, militias and masses served as vital sources of intelligence to detect the movement of army troops into the zones. Third, militias carried out acts of economic and military sabotage which forced the armed forces to designate a large proportion of their troops to the guarding of economic and military targets in the government-controlled areas. This scattered and spread out the troops to such an extent that it was difficult to take advantage of their gross numerical superiority to concentrate large numbers of them for operations against a particular zone of influence. In addition, continual sabotage provoked low morale among troops, who experienced a small but steady flow of casualties in their units. In this sense, sabotage was a defensive measure as well as an offensive tactic.

When the army launched attacks into the zones of influence, it would first have to pass through the interlocking network of pro-guerrilla hamlets and cantons to reach the zone of influence. This allowed the masses and the militia to compile intelligence on the passing army units: what unit they were from, how strong they were, what type of weapons they

carried, who the leaders were, how good their morale was, what kind of support they enjoyed, and so on. The militias and masses would then submit their intelligence to the guerrillas. While the guerrilla units made preparations to act, the militias mined areas through which army troops were expected to move, disrupted routes of access, and so on. In addition, the militias began to increase their sabotage and harassment operations in the government-controlled cities, towns, and economic zones in an attempt to force the government to halt its attack on the zones of influence and divert its troops from operations in the zones of influence to protecting and securing targets from guerrilla sabotage. In the meantime, the local guerrilla units would begin to conduct harassment and shadowing operations. The shadowing operations were to update existing intelligence information and to learn new details about army intentions. Harassing attacks were carried out by small groups (usually a squad of four to nine combatants) of local guerrillas that would approach army columns and take potshots at the troops. They would lay minefields in the path of the advancing soldiers, conduct hasty and deliberate ambushes, and so on. Depending on the situation, they might receive reinforcements from the strategic mobile forces, or be assigned to evacuate masses.

The expansion zones were vital to the FMLN because this was where there were people, and they were essentially the zones in which the guerrillas competed for the political loyalty of the people through combat with the army. Without the support of a proportion of the people, the FMLN knew it could not continue to exist as a viable guerrilla force. This was the proverbial water in which the guerrilla fish had to swim for survival. Consequently, the FMLN was continually seeking to increase its expansion zones and garner greater public support. It was here that the guerrillas fought for the hearts and minds of Salvadorans. The army knew this and carried out much of its civic action activity and recruited civil defense forces among these same fringe areas. Because of this, the expansion zones were some of the most hotly contested territory in all of the Salvadoran conflict, although the level of shot and shell expended in these areas was not as great as in other areas.

Defense Zones

The defense zones were the areas of persistence of the strategic mobile forces, which remained constantly on the move throughout the entire area. This was largely for security reasons, as the defense zones were mostly abandoned by civilians during heavy fighting in 1980–1981. Because of this, the army generally regarded this terrain as a free fire zone, knowing that any movement of more than a few people had to be members of the guerrilla forces. The strategic mobile forces units would move

from camp to camp throughout the zones. In addition to providing security from attack for the unit, it also meant that all the zones would be patrolled on a regular, but random basis by strong guerrilla forces. Most of the fortified guerrilla positions and permanent shelters were located in the defense zones. Extensive permanent minefields were laid around these fortified positions. Like the Vietcong and NVA, these positions were not permanently occupied, but used for a time, abandoned, and then improved by the next occupying unit. The key was that the guerrillas memorized the terrain and the location of the minefields to be able to immediately move in, occupy, and make improvements on the old position.

The mission of the mobile forces was to impede or slow down the penetration of the defensive areas by army troops. The tactics used by the mobile forces were more direct and aggressive than those used by the local guerrillas and militias. Furthermore, the mobile forces enjoyed superior weapons and equipment and a greater supply of ammunition. This was because they were higher-priority units in terms of supply, but also because the distance between the location of the guerrilla units and the logistic distribution points was much shorter. Because the area was free of civilians, there were few if any restrictions on the use of firepower. All of these factors combined meant that the most intense combat of the war was fought in the defensive zones. As the example of the battle of Campana Hill shows us, combat in El Salvador often reached conventional levels.

Strategic Rearguard Zones

The strategic rearguard zones were the nerve center of the guerrilla fronts and the zones of influence. All of the important command, communications, and logistical services were located in these zones. These included clandestine radio stations such as Radio Venceremos. Radio Venceremos was not a single transmitting station; rather it was a network of a number of transmitters, so that if one was knocked out the radio station would continue transmitting. In addition, Radio Venceremos could, if necessary, transmit from Nicaragua. The armed forces did not understand this early in the war and claimed to have knocked out Radio Venceremos on two or three occasions, only to be frustrated when it continued to transmit at the normal time. Radio Venceremos was the key propaganda tool of the FMLN. It gave the guerrilla point of view on the course of the war and on political events in the country. The armed forces began to use it for intelligence and information purposes, because they could often glean important information from Radio Venceremos not obtainable by other intelligence means. The armed forces also learned to use Radio Venceremos information against the FMLN. As it was a propaganda station, much of the information was somewhat exaggerated. These exag-

generations could often be used against the guerrillas by exposing the exaggeration, or by using the guerrillas' information to portray them as bloodthirsty terrorists. For example, if the guerrillas claimed in a given month to have knocked down five hundred energy poles, when in reality they had blown down 139, the highly exaggerated number could be used to show how the FMLN was hurting the population.

The strategic rearguard also included the Propaganda Committee, in charge of developing public relations campaigns to be carried out by guerrilla units operating across the country. These usually revolved around some political theme that the guerrillas would promote through their military actions, print, graphic, video, and audio media. The Strategic Communications Post and communications centers were another important element of the strategic rearguard. The FMLN learned the power of radio communications, and guerrilla units were well equipped with calculator radios that were often more advanced and handy than the PRC-77 radios carried by the government troops.

To support its units in the field, the FMLN also had a number of support and relay centers with sophisticated and powerful receiver-transmitters, encoding and decoding devices. These centers became prime targets for the armed forces, and on some occasions they managed to knock them out.

As the FMLN became dependent on its radio communications, the loss of a communications center could seriously disrupt the command and control of guerrilla units. It would take some time to reestablish contact and rebuild the communications network. As a result, the FMLN developed sophisticated methods to protect the exact location of these centers. These methods will be discussed in a later section. Always close to the communications centers were the headquarters elements of the FMLN. Methods to protect communications centers were also methods to protect the FMLN zone and front headquarters. In addition, the strategic rearguard contained clandestine hospitals, training schools, bunkers and shelters, underground ammunition, and weapons caches. Some of the latter were reportedly of very large size, containing up to several hundred rifles, millions of rounds of ammunition, and tons of explosives.

As a rule, the strategic rearguard zones were in the fringe areas of a few square kilometers of Salvadoran territory tucked up next to the Honduran border in Morazan and Chalatenango. The elements within the zone were controlled and protected by mobile forces, special forces, and special security troops of the FMLN Central Committee headquarters, especially those of the ERP and FPL.

Force Categories of the FMLN

The FMLN forces were organized into the following categories: strategic mobile forces, special select forces, local guerrilla units, and the clandestine militias, who were also known as “Self-Defense Forces of the Masses.”

By the end of the war, the combat forces of the FMLN were organized into a highly structured organization with a number of tiers, according to the nature, mission, and training (both ideological and military) of the force. The highest level for a combatant was to become a member of the special select forces. These were chosen from the best members of the strategic mobile forces or regular forces, who were in turn chosen from among the best members of the local guerrilla units, who were chosen from the best of the clandestine militias, who were recruited from the masses, who were recruited from the local population.

This structuring of forces responded to two concepts of organization. On the one hand they were set up to support the expansion of the subversive organization, and on the other hand they gave operational flexibility to guerrilla tactics in both the rural and urban settings.

THE STRATEGIC MOBILE FORCES

The Strategic Mobile Forces (SMF) were the most important category of FMLN force. They were composed of permanent units of columns, companies, and battalions. The members of these units had received thorough training in both regular and irregular warfare operations. The vast majority of the SMF members were battle-hardened veterans with extensive experience. When not operating as full units, the SMF forces were



Comparative photos showing the development of guerrilla main forces, 1982, 1985 (page 55), and 1990 (page 56). Note the continual improvement of weapons, clothing, and equipment.





dispersed in platoon- or squad-size elements according to the terrain and operational requirements. The SMF units were not attached permanently to any particular terrain, and they could carry out operations anywhere in the nation as assigned by the FMLN high command.

The strategic mobile forces were the main force of the FMLN. They were the regular guerrilla forces. In 1980 and 1981, these full-time guerrillas were formed into columns of between 30 and 100 combatants with a commander and whatever weapons could be found. A column of 100 men might have a total of 40 weapons, and if they were on good terms, might be able to borrow 20 weapons or so from a neighboring faction for an operation on the condition that they be returned and that the favor would be reciprocated when the other faction's forces went out to conduct their own missions.

Just prior to the 1981 offensive, large quantities of weapons were shipped to the FMLN. These included FALs from Cuba and M-16s from Vietnam. The acquisition of these weapons allowed the FMLN to begin creating much larger units after the conclusion of the offensive and the subsequent army counter-offensive. From mid-1981 to early 1982, each of the guerrilla organizations formed battalion- and brigade-size units. The ERP formed the Rafael Arce Zablah Brigade, known by the acronym BRAZ. This brigade consisted of two combat groups in the Francisco Sanchez Eastern Front, one in the north and one in the south. The battalions of the ERP were the Augustin Ticas (Commander Milton) Battalion (BAT), the Bruno Caballero (Commander Quincho) Battalion (BBC), the Heroic Workers Battalion (BTH), the Amilcar Hernandez (Commander Adan) Battalion (BAH), the Juan Carlos Battalion (BJC), and the Heroes of Cutumay Camones Battalion (BHCC). The FPL formed a brigade, The Felipe Peña Medoza Brigade, with two combat groups of two battalions each. Group 1, Felipe Peña Mendoza, was composed of the Juan Mendez Battalion (BJM), or X-21, and the Alejandro Solano Battalion (BAS), or K-93. Group 2, Roberto Sibrian, was composed of two battalions known as the Anfres Torres Sanchez Battalion (BATS), or SS-20, and the Ernesto Morales Sandoval Battalion (BEMS), or S-7. Group 1 was based in Chalatenango. Group 2 was based in the San Pedro hills of San Vicente. The FAL organized the Rafael Aguiñada Carranza Battalion (BRAC) which was based on Guazapo Mountain, and the Rafael A. Torres Battalion (BRAT) which was based in Chalatenango and the San Pedro hills of San Vicente, about 26 kilometers north of San Salvador. Also based on Guazapa was the RN unit known as the Carlos Arias Battalion (BCA). In addition, the RN formed the Sergio Hernandez Battalion (BSH) and the Dolores Ardin Battalion (BDA). The PRTC formed the Luis Alberto Diaz Detachment (DLAD), which operated largely in the San Pedro hills of San Vicente and in Morazan.

Battalion strength varied greatly throughout the war. Between 1982 and 1985, they were much larger than in the last three years of the con-

flict. Nominally, each battalion of both the BRAZ and the FPL Felipe Peña Mendoza Brigade consisted of two to three infantry columns (equal to a company) of three platoons of between 15 and 30 guerrillas each, and a heavy weapons platoon. This was fairly standard organization for the battalions of all of the factions, except for the PRTC.

Each column or company, as they were sometimes called, had its own organic communications unit that was responsible for communication with the battalion headquarters and with the subordinate platoons. The communications unit usually carried two-meter-band calculator radios made by Yaesu, Motorola, and others. Within the communications section there was a subunit that carried PRC-77 radios, the standard radio of the Salvadoran armed forces. This was not for guerrilla communications, but rather for intercepting army communications. One of their favorite tactics was to enter the army net and jam the net so that the army could not communicate at critical times. They would also harass the army units with demoralizing disinformation, and even attempt to give misleading orders, such as sending an advancing battalion in a wrong direction or directing artillery or air attacks on army troops or empty terrain. In theory this could be overcome by using codes. However, the use of codes requires long hours of training and planning. In the heat of battle, when radio operators became casualties, plans went astray and there was no time to wait for coding and decoding, so talking was done openly. This was the moment when the frequency monitors of the FMLN would jump in and play their tricks. While they made little strategical difference, they could play tactical havoc on a battle plan at a crucial moment.

Each column also had supply and logistical platoons that were in charge of feeding and supplying the infantry platoons. The infantry platoons consisted of around 30 men each, with three squads of 9 to 10 men.

The heavy weapons platoon consisted of mortars, heavy machine guns, and some recoilless rifles. A typical platoon might have one .50 caliber machine gun, two M-60 machine guns, one or two 81mm or 60mm mortars, one 57mm, 75mm, or 90mm recoilless rifle, and two RPG-2s. After 1984, the FMLN had RPG-7s. These platoons varied somewhat, depending on the availability of weapons and their ammunition. Toward the end of the war, ammunition became scarce for the .50 caliber machine guns, 81mm and 60mm mortars in Nicaragua, and the guerrillas could not capture enough from the armed forces to keep the weapons in constant operation. These weapons were mostly hidden away in secret caches and only brought out for specific, preplanned attacks. It was more common by this stage of the war for the artillery platoons to use popular artillery such as homemade mortars, ramps, and RPG-81s (a special Salvadoran modification which replaced the anti-tank warhead of the RPG-7 round with the warhead of an 81mm or 82mm mortar).

The main force battalions operated as concentrated units between 1982 and 1985. Most people familiar with the war in El Salvador think of it as having been a classical guerrilla war of attrition, consisting of numerous small engagements between patrol-size elements resulting in a handful of casualties on either side, with an occasional spectacular engagement. While there was plenty of this kind of action, especially in the latter half of the war, between 1981 and 1985 the fighting was much more intense. During these four years, the battles in El Salvador, especially in the guerrilla strongholds of Morazan and Chalatenango, were fought at a mostly conventional level. Actions were much more reminiscent of battalion and regimental combat of conventional wars like World War II and the Korean War than combat in more traditional guerrilla warfare such as in Portuguese Angola, Rhodesia, or the early part of the Vietnamese War. Before the initiation of substantial U.S. military aid in 1984, the armed forces often fought against the guerrillas with inferior forces on the battlefield, and with inferior supplies of weapons and ammunition. Single engagements often involved several thousand combatants and resulted in several hundred dead and wounded. The guerrillas even built fortified lines in Morazan, reminiscent of World War I trenches that took five thousand men of the armed forces weeks to break through. Army battalions of over a thousand men ran into guerrilla ambushes over one kilometer in length. While the armed forces suffered some heavy tactical defeats, they always managed to hold their own and keep the guerrillas from increasing their area of influence beyond where they already had strongholds established. What saved the armed forces was the sheer tenacity and toughness of the Salvadoran officers and men, and government airpower, which gave the armed forces the decisive edge in terms of mobility and firepower. After the influx of massive U.S. aid, the combination of the elite units and air force forced the FMLN to disperse its conventional units.

The following experience provides us with insight on how these units fought, and the dynamics of the war during this period.

The Battle of Campana Hill, January 4–8, 1985

At the time of the army operation there were two guerrilla battalions in the area, the ATS (SS-20) and the EMS (S-7) battalions. The ATS battalion had two columns. Column 1 was located near San Jacinto, in the Amates sector. The HQ element was with Column 1. Column 2 was in La Llorona, near Achiotes. The EMS battalion also had two detachments. In addition, it had an attached logistics and support platoon. Column 1 was at El Chile, south of San Antonio Achichilquito. Column 2 was in San Antonio proper. The support unit was in Ojos Buenos.

On January 4 an unidentified enemy battalion began to advance from near

Las Vegas (pedregal) toward La Laguna, its apparent objective. The enemy battalion reached La Laguna in the afternoon. During its advance it had flanking units occupy all of the surrounding heights that dominate the area. There was no contact with the FMLN. Immediately upon reaching La Laguna, the battalion set up a .50 caliber machine gun and fired at the guerrillas from long range. This made the guerrillas suspect it was an elite battalion. FMLN informants confirmed that the soldiers boasted they were. The guerrillas learned that they were the BIAT¹ Tehuacan. During the enemy advance, the guerrillas used their forces to evacuate the local masses from the operational area.

At noon the 3rd Platoon of Column 1, EMS Battalion was ordered to advance toward La Laguna. This platoon took up an intermediate position and sent a squad out ahead to conduct an aggressive reconnaissance. As they approached La Laguna, they saw some soldiers quite far away, and shot at them without receiving any return fire. The squad returned to the platoon position, and then this unit returned to Las Delicias. Based on the 3rd Platoon's report, the security units and masses of the subzone were only put on alert, not evacuated. The army set up camp for the night at La Laguna.

That same day, the Recondo unit of the 5th Brigade advanced toward San Jacinto from near Tecoluca. Two patrols of recondos were detected at 0900. When they reached the area around San Chico they ran into a unit of the 2nd Column, EMS Battalion, which was coming from the Tecoluca-Ingenio highway (Los Muros) where they had just lifted an ambush, after several hours of fruitless waiting. The guerrillas were surprised, but comrade Salomon, the commander, managed to break contact and withdraw. The recondos had been compromised. Column 1 of the ATS Battalion, under the command of comrade Chamba, was assigned to shadow and observe the recondo unit. Orders were given not to attack, because it was determined that the operation would continue the next day, and that the guerrillas should wait to see what the army intended to do. In the afternoon the recondo patrol established a position on Jaltepeque hill. The two opposite directions of the soldiers' advance was noted by the guerrilla high command.

At dawn on January 5, the HQ of the EMS was moved to the El Pilon hill to direct the efforts of the FMLN battalion against the army forces. Meanwhile, the Tehuacan BIAT continued its advance from La Laguna and almost reached Las Delicias and Pozo Azul. Column 1, EMS sent out a platoon to shadow the enemy force. At different times during the day, this platoon sent out two squads which conducted harassment attacks on the flanks and rear of the advancing army battalion. These attacks produced no reported enemy casualties, and there was no evidence that would lead the guerrillas to believe they had inflicted any. Detachment 1 then withdrew toward the village of El Chile, establishing itself there for the night. The other units of the EMS maintained their positions and made no movement except the security unit, which moved when the HQ was moved to the El Pilon hill. The security platoon was sent to the location of the support platoon. Here it made camp for the night.

Meanwhile, the ATS took positions in the dawn hours on the heights on the east and south of San Jacinto to attack the army recondos when they moved. The recondos were in a bad position. As soon as they left the heights of Jaltepeque they would drop down into a disadvantageous location, a narrow ravine.

Here the ATS would attack them. However, the recondos were alert and didn't move. They had detected the guerrillas closely shadowing them and suspected the trap. They stayed put and called for artillery fire. No more army or guerrilla movement was made that day.

The regional command was advised that all indications were that the principal enemy intent was for BIAT Tehuacan to take Campana Hill. The 5th Brigade Recondo's mission was to support that attack by carrying out a feint to draw away guerrilla units from the main advance. That evening, the guerrilla commanders worked feverishly to devise a plan to foil the army operation.

January 6. At dawn, all of the combat units received specific missions. However, as of yet, not even one man was assigned to the top of Campana Hill. The ATS was on the southwest slope, and the EMS to the north, near the road that goes from San Bartolo to Rio Frio.

The EMS was in a U-shaped position around the village of El Chile, a good position from which to observe the enemy. By determining routes of approach, it was decided to attack BIAT Tehuacan when they reached the soccer field and other disadvantageous places. At 0800 a helicopter was seen delivering food to the BIAT. The comrades counted the number of bundles delivered, and also thought they saw the helicopter deliver an M-60 machine gun (this was confirmed later by a captured soldier). After they had received their supplies, BIAT Tehuacan broke camp and began to advance toward the guerrilla position. However, they soon became lost to view behind some small hills. It was thought that within a short time the soldiers would cross these hills and move into the kill zone of the EMS. However, by noon the BIAT had still not run into the guerrilla positions. They had either stopped or were advancing at a much slower pace than anticipated.

While the EMS prepared for the arrival of BIAT Tehuacan, Column 1 of the ATS began to attack the 5th Brigade Recondos. Perhaps thinking that their artillery fire had scared off the guerrilla forces, since they had not been attacked during the night, the recondos attempted to leave the top of Jaltepeque hill at 0900. The guerrillas were still in place, and waited to attack the recondos until they were all coming off the hill. The recondos reacted very quickly without returning fire, made a controlled withdrawal (a few men at a time) back up the hill, where they set up a perimeter. The guerrillas were now at a disadvantage, but began to move up to take the hilltop from the recondos. The recondos knew they were outnumbered and outgunned and made an urgent request for air support. Within minutes some A-37 Dragonflies and UH-1 helicopters appeared. The A-37s effectively bombed the slopes of the hill and diminished guerrilla combat effectiveness by forcing them to keep their heads down. Several guerrillas were wounded by small arms fire and bomb fragments from the A-37s. The recondos first evacuated their wounded. Then the rest of the recondos withdrew when the guerrilla attack died down. After the recondos withdrew, Column 1 was ordered to return to the positions it had occupied on January 4, before the start of the army operation. They were back in place by dusk.

Meanwhile, the EMS had been ordered to stand and resist the enemy advance. However, the enemy did not appear, so this order was not carried out. After the battle against the recondos, the EMS was ordered to engage in combat with the army by going out and seeking BIAT Tehuacan. Column 1 was ordered to carry

out this mission while the rest of the units were ordered to stay in position. The three platoons of Column 1 moved out of their position in an inverted wedge, but the formation soon broke up as those in the center were moving through flat terrain, while the others were on sloped terrain with thick brush. The center platoon quickly outpaced the flanks and inadvertently became the lead element of a normal wedge. Because of this, contact was lost with the platoon on the left. Furthermore, the squads of this platoon lost contact with each other and became lost. This happened at a critical moment. In the midst of the column's confusion, as they were attempting to sort themselves out and reestablish the proper formation, the lead platoon was spotted by an enemy position on a small hill, east of Ermita del Chile, which opened fire on the platoon's flank with a .50 caliber machine gun and small arms fire. While the lead platoon was pinned down, the platoon on the right counter-attacked on the flank of the enemy position. The enemy fire diminished and the soldiers withdrew a short distance. This took the pressure off the lead platoon, which was able to rally and make its own attack on the enemy position. Finally, one of the squads of the lost platoon on the left attacked the enemy in the rear. These attacks were carried out piecemeal rather than in a coordinated rush, so their effectiveness was much reduced. However, they were strong attacks, employing rifle fire, M-60 machine guns and M-79 grenade launchers.

The enemy regrouped and advanced to El Naranjal del Chile. It forced one of the Column 1 platoons to retreat and then dug in, making fortifications with numerous rocks that could be found lying about. This was at around 1700 hours. Column 1 maintained a distance of about 150 meters, observing and sporadically attacking on the southwest side of the enemy position at El Naranjal. A Detachment 1 platoon was sent to attack on the north, but it took more than two and one-half hours to get there and still didn't arrive, even though it was only 800 meters distant. Column 1 was commanded by Lieutenant Carlos and Column 2 commanded by Lieutenant Anacleto. After BIAT Tehuacan set up its position at El Naranjal, the guerrillas of Column 1 saw that there was a weak spot on the eastern side of the enemy position.

Column 2 was sent out to join Column 1 and attack the enemy position. The terrain on which the enemy had set up was disadvantageous for the guerrillas to attack. On the south and north it was cut by a small stream which converged into a large stream on the east. The guerrillas would attack on the east where the enemy was least expecting an attack because all their fire had, until now, come from the west. The plan was to launch a concentrated and simultaneous attack with all of the platoons. The attack would be initiated by the 1st platoon of Column 2 that was sent around to attack the eastern side of the enemy position. The other Column 2 platoon was on the right of Column 1 on the Pajalito (San Bartolo) side. First platoon Column 2 also advanced extremely slowly until Lieutenant Anacleto went out and took command. Then the pace picked up.

When Column 2's 1st platoon was close to the enemy position, the attack was initiated by Column 1, who layed down a base of fire from the west using the 90mm recoilless rifle and all of Column 1's small arms and machine guns. This fire pinned down BIAT Tehuacan, so the assault force was able to get to within 30 meters of the enemy, who were almost all in fortified positions. Anacleto's platoon assaulted the east side, but the enemy here had been prudent and also

built rock fortifications. They drove off Anacleto's men with heavy fire. Three of Anacleto's men were killed. The enemy also suffered some casualties. Darkness fell, and the guerrillas attempted no more attacks on the army.

During the night, the EMS took positions south of El Chile on the road, and the regional command arrived to review the situation of troops and material and see what tactics could be used the next day.

January 7. At 0300 hours the EMS battalion leaders asked the regional command to be allowed to attack the army the following day. This request was approved. However, at that moment there were not any grenades or enough ammunition on hand. At 0430 the EMS took up the following positions. Column 1 sent one platoon to the top of the hill of a saddle, along with a squad from a support platoon with the 90mm recoilless rifle. These men were under the command of Lieutenant Carlos. Another platoon of Column 1 set up on an adjacent hilltop of the saddle, at a lower elevation, to the east of Lieutenant Carlos's unit. The third platoon of Column 1 joined two platoons of Column 2 under Lieutenant Anacleto. This was done because the third platoon of Column 2 was maintaining its position covering the east of San Bartolo. The troops under Anacleto were on the road under the slopes of the hill to the southeast of the El Chile soccer field. The plan was to allow the enemy to advance up the hill and then attack from the high ground just as they were reaching the crest. This fire would hold the enemy, while Anacleto's men then rolled up the flank. Since the enemy was moving north to south, Anacleto's men would practically hit the enemy in the rear.

Everything began as planned. The enemy started up the hill in two columns. However, at 0700 it was noted that Anacleto's men on the road could be seen by the soldiers moving up the hill, and so the guerrillas withdrew further to the east to stay out of sight. Apparently, the soldiers never noticed the guerrillas on the road. At 1000 hours the point elements of BIAT Tehuacan were reaching the crest, and the guerrillas on the hill opened fire. The soldiers retreated down the slope a good way, and then the BIAT troops began cautiously probing their way around the hill. Sensing a trap, they moved very slowly. Guerrilla fire was sporadic and disjointed. The guerrilla .50 caliber only fired about 50 rounds. It was not until 1300 hours that a platoon of Anacleto's men attacked the enemy on the east flank. Some small groups of soldiers managed to slip through the trap, but most were kept inside the area. At this time it became clear to BIAT Tehuacan that it was being hit in the front from Lieutenant Carlos's group at the top of the hill, and on the left flank and rear from the base of the hill by Lieutenant Anacleto's group. The enemy was still organized and began moving away from Anacleto's men to the western part of the hill along the slope. Fighting was at short distances as the enemy continually moved to the west away from the fire. However, the terrain, which was broken and slippery, made close pursuit difficult. Furthermore, communications were difficult because the curve of the hill meant that the guerrillas could not see each others' positions and the only way to communicate was by radio. The simultaneous guerrilla effort to try to push the army into a trapped pocket, and BIAT Tehuacan's efforts to escape the trap, caused the guerrilla units to become fairly spread out, strung out over about one kilometer. Despite the broken terrain, the troops of Lieutenant Anacleto made a supreme effort to stay close to the army units and maintain the pressure.

Anacleto informed the rest of the guerrilla forces that he would accomplish his task. The danger was that BIAT Tehuacan would realize how spread out the guerrillas were and break out by punching through one of the holes in the guerrilla lines. The guerrillas were using captured army radios to find the frequency and listen in on the army conversations. The guerrillas soon found the frequency, and knew that the army was not using codes.

At about this time, the guerrillas had a stroke of luck when they were able to kill one of the army company commanders. Before he died, he told his troops to try to break out of the guerrilla trap. The death of this commander caused the company to lose some of its coherence, and it milled about, uncertain of where to go.

Through the enemy's shouts and through guerrilla monitoring of the enemy battalion's radio communications, it became clear that the battalion commander was there and his solution was to attempt to take the top of the hill and dominate the situation from there. The order was given to a company commander and his unit 150 meters from the top of the hill to take it. This company commander asked for artillery support from the Injiboa Battalion. Combining this with the fire from the battalion's own 60mm mortars, they launched a furious assault. Using a generous supply of grenades and automatic fire, the enemy company almost took the top of the hill. A group of soldiers attempted to rush the crest, but were shot down. The company got to within 30 meters from the top. Here there was a fierce exchange of fire, and within 30 minutes the company commander had been hit twice with rifle fire. The company commander called the battalion commander and asked for help, revealing that he had ten casualties and that, if he didn't get help and was forced to abandon the position, he, the dead, and the wounded would not make it out. Another army company then attacked up the western slope of the hill, to support the first company. This company worked its way up to the same elevation as the other company but also failed to take the top of the hill. A few soldiers attempted, but with little enthusiasm.

The guerrilla troops did not make any adjustments in their positions and continued to attack the enemy from the rear and the left flank. The army continued to move toward the western slope of the hill.

The guerrillas on the crest of the hill had now just about run out of ammunition. By redistributing some from those who had fired little, this problem was solved.

The high command now ordered the ATS to support the EMS. A platoon at Llorona moved out and arrived to support Anacleto's troops on the east at 1700 hours. At 1400 hours the 1st Column of the ATS left Amates to attack the western slope of the hill, where the enemy had not yet been attacked.

Meanwhile, between 1500 and 1600 hours the enemy called in an A-37 attack jet which strafed and bombed the top of the hill. The army called in and said the attack had been perfect because they felt as if they were being bombed themselves.

However, while everyone was thrown around, the guerrillas only suffered one casualty, slightly wounded. Yet, the horror of the bombing almost caused them to abandon the position. It was only through the supreme effort of Lieutenant Carlos that the position was maintained. The A-37 made a second pass to attack

the position, but orders were given to the man intercepting army communications to direct the attack at another spot. This attempt was successful and the attack didn't affect the comrades. At 1700 hours the enemy made another attempt to take the top of the hill. This attempt lasted about 30 minutes. The guerrillas were now down to 30 shots each and had to fire on semiautomatic. Carlos and one other guerrilla had one grenade each. One guerrilla took both grenades, rose up and threw them where the soldiers were. There were two loud explosions, some screams from the enemy positions, and the firing stopped.

At this point the enemy was concentrated mostly on the western slope, as Anacleto's forces had attacked at 1700 hours and pushed them there. Anacleto's forces were reinforced by the ATS platoon as well as the platoon that had been at San Bartolo. Anacleto's troops were all in good spirits, as they had pushed the enemy to the western slope, taken prisoners, caused casualties, and captured weapons and equipment. Ammunition and a squad of reinforcements were sent to the top of the hill along with some homemade, fuse-lit grenades. Because of the resupply and reinforcements, those at the top of the hill were now in better spirits and were able to occupy positions they had abandoned.

As the enemy was now concentrated on the western slope, mostly near the top, the plan was to conduct an all-out assault once the 1st Column of the ATS arrived to attack on the west. By nightfall the 1st Column had still not arrived and the army launched another attack on the top of the hill, by low crawling and firing. The guerrillas resisted and blindly fired a 90mm round where they thought the enemy was advancing. This must have been effective, because it stopped the enemy advance. The comrades then began their own counter-attack. First, they threw grenades at the enemy troops, and once these ran out they moved down toward the army positions. Here they were stopped and thrown back, as the soldiers had already dug foxholes and built rock fortifications.

The 1st Column of the ATS arrived and a synchronized attack was launched against the Tehuacan Battalion. The army resisted the attack in its fortifications and fought back with all its weapons except the .50 caliber machine gun. Another attack was launched against the Tehuacan. The Tehuacan was supported by the artillery of the Injiboa. At 2000 hours, an AC-47 arrived and began circling the area, dropping flares to keep it lit up and attacking the guerrillas with its machine guns. The guerrillas attempted to fire and knock the AC-47 down with the single .50 caliber machine gun, and several 7.62mm machine guns and rifles of the support platoon on Buena Vista hill. This attempt failed, and the AC-47 continued to support the Tehuacan until midnight. The Atonal BIRI (Immediate Reaction Infantry Battalion) was on an operation at Angela and gave continual verbal encouragement to the Tehuacan over the radio. Knowing that the guerrillas were on the same frequency, the Atonal had, throughout the day, tried to scare the guerrillas off with disinformation by saying they were sending in elite battalions and helicopter reinforcements. The guerrillas responded with disinformation of their own which caused some worry to the army. By midnight, the army was no longer using the radios to communicate because of guerrilla interference.

When both attacks had failed to annihilate the army positions by midnight, and the ATS detachment had completely run out of ammunition with no chance

of receiving further resupply of bullets or grenades, the guerrilla forces were ordered to withdraw. Column 1 of the ATS was ordered back to its original position. Column 1, EMS was ordered the next morning to move to Las Penonas camp between Pilon and San Bartolo where it would join the J-28 FES platoon (Special Select Forces). Column 2 was ordered the next morning to move back to San Bartolo. That night the masses were evacuated to San Bartolo along with the Battalion command post.

January 8. In the morning, the Tehuacan Battalion was still surrounded by guerrilla forces and was ordered not to move from its positions. At 0800 three A-37s arrived and swooped down to bomb the former guerrilla positions. This included bombings of positions between Pilon and Las Penonas. After the A-37s left, an O-2A observation plane stayed, and after 40 minutes a formation of 12 helicopters appeared, along with a Hughes 500 and an AC-47. The troops attempted landings at El Pilon and Las Peñas. The guerrilla forces had orders to fire only if attacked, and here the fight started. The army reported two wounded in the helicopters and lifted off, flying back toward San Vicente. The Tehuacan Battalion did not budge, and the guerrilla forces withdrew and the army troops on Las Penonas were pushed off. At 0930, two AC-47s, O-2s, and four A-37s appeared. Two of the latter attacked Las Penonas in support of the troops that had been pushed off. This attack killed Lieutenant Ernesto. At 1000 hours, another helicopter landing was made, this time right on El Campana, almost on top of the Tehuacan. This landing, supported by two A-37s, the O-2s, and the Hughes 500s now moved up the hill and took the hilltop. The helicopters began to evacuate the wounded. The enemy advance that day only reached El Pilon. Further reinforcements arrived as the Parachute Battalion came in from San Jacinto and troops from the Cañas Battalion and the Jiboa moved in from Achiot.

When night fell the high command withdrew to the positions of the ATS on the Chichontepec volcano. The EMS went to Obrajuelo, to the South of Tecoluca. After the enemy finished its operation, the EMS moved back into the area. Only the ATS stayed in its position.²

This experience, as recorded by the FMLN, shows what the fighting was like at the peak of the war in El Salvador. The guerrillas used highly developed and sophisticated tactics, and were capable of taking on regular ESAF units. They employed light artillery, support weapons, and even heavy machine guns in maneuver warfare. What always gave the armed forces the edge was air power. In this example, A-37 attack planes and AC-47 gunships turned the tide of battle in favor of the besieged army troops, averted disaster, and inflicted heavy casualties on the assaulting guerrilla force. However, at the time this battle took place, the guerrillas were already rethinking their tactics. While the battalions and brigades retained their names, it became suicidal to maintain the strategic mobile forces units in concentrated masses. The guerrillas dispersed the column platoons to separate camps, and developed the tactics of concentration and deconcentration (which will be discussed later) for major

assaults and battles. However, mobile strategic force units remained part of the FMLN combat organization through the end of the war, their primary task being that of operating defensively in the outer edge of the zone of influence, and offensively to attack enemy positions and units outside the zones of influence.

LOCAL GUERRILLA UNITS

Local guerrilla units were full-time guerrillas whose role was primarily defensive and auxiliary. Their mission was to defend a particular zone of influence from army offensives, and to assist the regular guerrilla units in attacking objectives within and immediately outside the zone of influence. In addition, they were to assist in the efforts to recruit militia units. They provided the protection and support for the expansion units, and acted as the higher echelon for militia unit activities. Orders for militia operations came down through local guerrilla commanders, and the militia leaders' points of contact to the organization were the local guerrilla commanders. In addition, logistical needs that the militias might have were conveyed through the nearest local guerrilla unit. The primary difference between the regular and local units was that local units were tied to specific territory. Mobile units could be assigned to operate or attack objectives anywhere in the country, although individual units tended to operate in the same general regions. They were the main offensive combat force of the FMLN. The local units were mostly defensive. They were permanent to the subzone within the zone of influence where they operated. Their permanence was the administrative justification for command of the militias and masses to be routed through them, even though the quality of the local guerrillas was not always very high. Most of the members were local people who were somehow considered unfit to serve in the regular units. They were less well equipped than the regular units. For example, if the regular units were carrying M-16s and FN FALs, the local units would carry older G-3s, FALs, and some M-1 carbines. They would have few machine guns, if any, and all of their artillery and explosives would be of the homemade type. Local guerrilla units were organized into platoon-size camps and fought almost exclusively using guerrilla hit-and-run tactics.

THE CLANDESTINE MILITIAS AND EXPANSION GROUPS

The clandestine militias were organized by expansion units from among the most advanced elements of the masses that supported the cause of FMLN. The FMLN especially targeted organizations such as labor unions and trade guilds with Leftist political leanings to gain new recruits. The basic mission of the militias was to help prepare the conditions for

insurrection. This included massive sabotage in the vital zones, defense of the organized masses, harassing attacks of military operations and patrols, and attack of government infrastructure and civil defense units.

The militias operated as either a separate and distinct group in the zones of influence, or they were mixed in with the masses (agitation groups) to stir up spontaneous mob violence at political manifestations, and so on. The former included participating in regular guerrilla operations. However, their main task was to carry out sabotage and help carry out transportation stoppages. The latter included using such tactics as setting up barricades, burning tires, smashing up cars or other private property, and so on. Every attempt was made to keep the logistics of the militias within the grasp of all members. Emphasis was placed on the use of homemade weapons, such as explosives and flammables, and those that could be purchased fairly openly (such as revolvers and pistols). Since militia units were supposedly self-sustaining, there was little if any problem with supplies. This meant that an unlimited number of people could be organized into militia units without burdening the guerrilla logistical efforts dedicated to the supply of the regular guerrilla units. A constant effort of recruitment could be carried out without hampering the main force guerrilla structures. The only limiting factor to the formation of militia units was the number of recruits.

The militias were organized as follows on all of the fronts. For each front there was a Committee of Production and Transportation. These committees were in charge of producing the food, uniforms, and other sundry items for the regular guerrilla forces, in addition to helping move these items from one place to another without being detected. A second committee was the Logistics Committee, which helped move the items provided by the Production and Transportation Committee. The difference was that the Logistics Committee's main task was to assist moving and storing weapons and ammunition. Other militia members were charged with providing information. Essentially, this meant spying on the enemy and keeping one's eyes and ears open for any unusual army and government movement that might indicate an attack or some other move. While there were specific people assigned this task, all militia members were admonished to discreetly seek out information on the government troops, and to immediately report any findings to the nearest guerrilla unit.

Another militia assignment was to conduct propaganda activities. This consisted of the clandestine distribution of propaganda leaflets and the posting of banners and posters on walls, across streets, and so on. One of the favorite tactics was what the FMLN called a propaganda bomb. This consisted of a cardboard box with a small, low-power explosive underneath a large number of propaganda leaflets. The explosive was set off by a homemade time igniter. The box was disguised to look like any

ordinary package or box that might be carried by someone going or returning from a trip to the marketplace. The bomb would be placed in a public place like a market or a park full of people, and the time device would be activated. The operator would attempt to walk away as nonchalantly as possible and disappear into the crowd. When the bomb exploded it would first grab the attention of everyone in the vicinity and simultaneously shoot the leaflets up into the air, which would then spread over a fairly wide area.³ People were sure to pick up the leaflets out of sheer curiosity, if nothing else, or as mementos of the experience. The FMLN hoped they would also read and be influenced by the message. Another technique was to spray-paint slogans and symbols on any surface big enough and within public view, such as buildings, road signs, public buses, and the like.

The militias were also asked to conduct sabotage operations. Sabotage operations consisted of destroying things of economic and military value to the enemy. Sabotage harassed and impeded the government and military because it forced the government to commit more economic and military resources to protecting and rebuilding destroyed or damaged items. This in turn meant that fewer resources would be available to the army to conduct offensive operations against the guerrillas. In the early years, militias largely set up road barricades and dug anti-vehicle trenches. This was usually done at night. The purpose was to impede enemy movement. In the early years, militias were also given the task of chaperoning the masses when the guerrillas evacuated territory in the face of army offensives.

Later in the war, militias were also tasked with economic sabotage. One of the favorite targets was the power and communications infrastructure. The militias became adept at knocking down power and telephone lines and destroying telephone boxes. Militias also attacked the businesses of those persons they considered enemies of the people or particularly hateful allies of the government and the army.

The militias were recruited by expansion units that worked with the local guerrillas. However, the expansion units were generally autonomous and so important that they were considered part of the zone command structure, and they reported directly to the zone commanders. Essentially, they operated like salesmen. There was the commander of the expansion unit (like a regional manager) with several expansionists under him (salesmen). The expansion commander was responsible for organizing rallies, known in Salvadoran parlance as "mitins" (from the English word *meeting*). The mitins were held to explain why the guerrillas fought. After the mitin the expansionists would talk to those that expressed interest.

A guerrilla document entitled *Urban Commando Instruction Manual #4: The Organization and "Foguelo"⁴ of Clandestine Guerrillas⁵*, printed

in 1987, provides an excellent explanation of how the expansionists operated to create clandestine militia units. This document has a comic-book format and tells the story of two young men, Julio and Felipe, and a young girl, Lupita, who join the clandestine militias. It is an excellent description of the guerrilla recruiting process known as "fogueo." "Fogueo" in guerrilla parlance means to fire, and is similar in concept to treating clay vessels with fire to harden them and make them capable of holding water. Fogueo was the process by which guerrilla recruits were toughened and the weak and fainthearted were weeded out. Fogueo consisted of a very carefully designed program of increasingly risky operations in support of the guerrilla movement. As the candidates successfully completed each operation, it gave them confidence to carry out the next danger level of operation until they became full-fledged guerrilla combatants. In the comic book, the three young people are recruited by Pancho at a mitin. When it was determined that these people were desirable for recruitment, further meetings were conducted among the four protagonists. Here they discuss how they can help the FMLN effort. At first they are encouraged to do small things such as reporting on government troops in their neighborhoods and writing FMLN propaganda on the backs of public bus seats. At frequent meetings the protagonists share their exploits and are encouraged to carry out more daring activities in the intervening time between each meeting. However, all of the activities so far deal only with propaganda. At first the operations are individual, but gradually they involve the participation of more people, with greater specialization of tasks. They make FMLN posters and put them up on houses and streets. The culminating propaganda activity is that they are taught how to make a leaflet bomb, how to set it off, and how to conduct a successful operation to place it without being detected, and get away. In the comic book they place the leaflet bomb in the middle of a crowded park with soldiers posted around it and watch, delighted, as it goes off, shaking the nerves of the startled soldiers.

After this is carried out successfully, the group is ready for combat military activity. They spend free time and weekends away from their town at a small farm. Here they learn how to use pistols, basic military tactics, and the construction of simple explosives under the guidance of the expansionist Pancho. The culmination of this training is a night sabotage attack against a store owned by a military officer in a different town. The store is to be blown up with a homemade explosive device. When this attack is carried out successfully, the three recruits are considered full-fledged militia members.

The continual recruitment of militias guaranteed that there was always a sufficient number of people to fill the places of killed and maimed FMLN guerrillas. In the early part of the war, militias were essentially unarmed guerrillas and guerrilla sympathizers who were occasionally

called upon to support guerrilla operations, and who waited their turn for weapons to become available so they could become regular guerrillas. With the massive flow of weapons from Nicaragua and Cuba, the emphasis was placed on regular units, and the proportion and importance of militias was ignored. At the war's peak there were around fourteen thousand regular guerrillas and perhaps six thousand militia members. However, after the armed forces forced the guerrillas to split up into smaller units, the importance of the militias rose dramatically. By 1989, the proportion of militias and regular guerrillas was almost entirely reversed, with six thousand regular guerrillas and a far greater number of militia members.⁶ This reflected the increasingly important role that attrition warfare played in wearing down army units before they came in contact with regular guerrilla units.

NOTES

1. Batallón de Infantería Anti-Terrorista, or Anti-Terrorist Infantry Battalion.
2. FPL, *Principales Experiencias Operativas de la D.A. #2 del Año 1985* (San Vicente, El Salvador: Ediciones Chinchontepec Heroico, 1986).
3. FMLN, *Cartilla de Milicias y Guerrillas* (El Salvador: Publicaciones FMLN, n.d.), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.
4. The term *foguelo* comes from the word "fuego," which means fire. It is a word made up by the revolutionaries that means to have experienced fire. In general terms, it means experience one gains by real experience versus theoretical understanding. Training by "foguelo" involved a process of submitting a new recruit to a series of experiences, each one more complex and more dangerous than the previous one.
5. FMLN, *Manual de Instrucción Para Los Comandos Urbanos No. 4: La Organización y Foguelo de las Guerrillas Clandestinas* (El Salvador: Publicaciones FMLN, 1987), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.
6. Salvadoran intelligence estimates obtained from armed forces in 1992.

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Special Select Forces (FES)

The FES¹ were the highest category of combat unit of the FMLN. They are discussed in a separate chapter because the nature of the units and their tactics were unique. Although they were the highest category of FMLN force, the gulf between the FES units and the strategic mobile forces was far greater than the distinction between the militias and the regular force guerrillas. Their mission was to attack and destroy objectives deep in the enemy rear to eliminate the army's strategic and tactical advantage. Their role was to act as equalizers. They were the guerrillas' substitute for heavy artillery and aviation.² The personnel were selected from among the best of the strategic mobile forces.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE FES

The first members of the FES were trained in Cuba between 1980 and 1982. The FPL and the ERP were the strongest organizations of the FMLN, and these created their own FES units to carry out their strategic and tactical plans.

The FPL developed organizational concepts on FES as early as 1979. At this time they conceived of three categories of special forces: sapper commandos, combat swimmers, and urban commandos. The sapper commandos were to be modeled on the Vietnamese sappers who had successfully carried out operations against U.S. and South Vietnamese installations and units during the conflict in that country. The combat swimmers were to operate in the many rivers, lakes, and on the long coast line of El Salvador. Their mission would be to destroy strategic bridges and Salvadoran naval assets to facilitate the free flow of weapons

from ports in Nicaragua, across the Gulf of Fonseca, to El Salvador. The urban commandos would have the mission of conducting terrorist operations such as bank heists, special assassinations, bombings, and providing the security for the FPL leadership, many of whom lived in safehouses in San Salvador at that time. Several cadres were sent to Cuba to undergo training for these specialties in 1980. However, some of the programs ran into serious problems. So few combat swimmers passed the course that there weren't enough men to form a complete unit. Furthermore, the combat swimmers couldn't obtain their equipment because the priority at the time was building up the 15,000-man conventional guerrilla army. Instead of forming a unit, the combat swimmers were dispersed among camps in Chalatenango, on the border with Honduras. One man was assigned to a camp at Portillo, Chalatenango, and his skills were used to retrieve weaponry and equipment that had been dropped in the local rivers.³ The formation of urban commando and commando sapper units was somewhat more successful. However, the Salvadoran armed forces developed excellent intelligence on the activities of the urban guerrillas, and literally cleaned them out of the main cities, except for some isolated pockets. In this sweep, most of the urban commandos were killed or captured. During the 1981 offensive, the commando/sappers were not used as they were trained, but were assigned to bolster militia units in San Salvador. Here they suffered heavy casualties, and their performance was lackluster at best.⁴ The FPL saw little use in sending men off for specialized training if their performance was no better than average in combat. The remaining sapper commandos were, like the frogmen, dispersed among regular guerrilla camps in Chalatenango. The one exception to this general failure of FPL special forces was the attack on the Puente de Oro bridge in October 1981. However, this attack was carried out by the FPL combat swimmers reinforced by a Cuban team (the FPL swimmers' trainers). While a regular unit launched a distraction attack on the bridge from the land, the Cuban/FPL team floated its explosives under the bridge, attached them to the key pylons, and then floated quietly down the river while the battle raged above. Once the team was safely away, the signal was given, the land force withdrew, and the bridge went up in smoke.⁵ However, this huge success did not inspire the FPL to create new FES units (since it had been carried out largely by the Cubans) until March of 1983. At this time, FES units were established as units directly under the high command of the FAPL.

Meanwhile, in 1981, the ERP sent twelve men, under the same sapper/commando Cuban program, to receive special training for four months at the school at Matanzas, La Habana, Cuba. Rather than for the formation of a unit, the ERP required this special training for the specific mission of attacking the Salvadoran air force. In this endeavor they were probably inspired by a similar attack, carried out by the Puerto Rican (National



Urban guerrillas like these drilling at the National University in 1980 were driven out of the Salvadoran cities by 1981. The man closest to the camera carries a homemade grenade launcher of Cuban design that used a .22 caliber blank to propel the grenade. Guerrillas from all over Latin America were taught how to make this and other weapons at a special course in Cuba.

Liberation Armed Forces) FALN terrorist group on January 10, 1981, against a U.S. Air National Guard base in which eight combat planes were damaged or destroyed. The FALN had carried out this attack to show solidarity with the January 10 FMLN final offensive.⁶ Using the same techniques, the ERP penetrated the Ilopango air base and destroyed fifteen combat aircraft and several other transportation craft. The spectacular success of this raid inspired the ERP to maintain the sapper/commando force as a unit, and to train additional forces in this specialty.

Later, organizations such as FAL, RN, and the PRTC also sent people to Cuba, or to the ERP and FPL schools to be trained in FES techniques, but these units did not receive the same support and priority as those of the FPL and ERP. As a result, the high command of the FMLN lost faith in them except for use in small localized actions. This was because many of their operations in larger and more sophisticated actions had been less than successful. Meanwhile, FES units enjoyed some fairly spectacular success. Attacks on the 4th Brigade base at El Paraiso, the Puente de Cuscatlan Bridge, Cerron Grande, and several other minor actions convinced the FMLN of the importance of special forces.

In May and June of 1985, a meeting of the high command of the FMLN was held, in which military guidelines were established, including the priority of developing and creating more FES units, and to designate these units as being the highest category of combat unit of irregular warfare in El Salvador.⁷ In essence, FES units had gone from the category of special purpose troops to becoming an institutional elite. However, just as they became an institutional elite, their performance in the field declined. This was mostly due to the fact that the army had developed tactics that forced the FMLN to split up into small units. It was rarely after this that the FMLN was able to concentrate for a full-scale attack, and the results of these attacks were mixed at best. Among the successes were the second attack on the 3rd Brigade base at San Miguel in 1986 and the second attack on the 4th Brigade base at El Paraiso in 1987. Among the failures were the attack on the Military Training Center (CEMFA) at La Union in October 1985, the attack on El Picacho in 1985, and the attack on Military District 4 at San Francisco Gotera, Morazan in May 1987. Mixed results were obtained during the 1989 urban offensive in San Salvador and San Miguel.

The FES units of the FPL were called F-30 and J-28. The F-30 was the FES unit subordinate to the high command of the FPL. The F-30 had a platoon whose mission was to provide security for the high command of the FPL in the department of Chalatenango. There were two platoons that were located near the border with Honduras in subzones 1, 2, and 3 of the Apolinario Serrano Northern Front. The F-30's total strength was approximately 100 guerrillas.

The J-28 FES units were those FES troops subordinated to the brigades

of the FPL. There were two groups corresponding to each FPL brigade. Group 1 operated on the Western, Northern, Central, and Metropolitan Front. Their home base was on the Northern Front in subzone 1. The strength of Group 1 was approximately 30 guerrillas. Group 2 consisted of approximately 40 guerrillas and operated in the Para-Central and Eastern fronts, and their permanent base was in subzone Marcial Gavidia and subzone Jaragua.

Some of the major attacks carried out by the FPL FES included the first attack on the 4th Brigade, the attack on the Cerron Grande hydroelectric dam, the second attack on the 4th Brigade, the third attack on the 4th Brigade.

The FAL organized its special forces along similar lines to the FPL. In fact, the initial FAL units were trained by the FPL and operated jointly with them for a time. The strategic special forces unit of the FAL was known as the U-24. This was a platoon-size unit that was organized by members of the FPL J-28.⁸ Consequently, the U-24 organization and equipment mirrored those of the J-28. The U-24 was based on Guazapa Mountain and participated in the first attack on the 4th Brigade. It was decimated during the army "Fenix" operations from 1985 to 1987, but was reorganized and fought in Soyapango during the 1989 urban offensive. Another special forces unit of the FAL was known as the COBRAC (Commandos of the BRAC, the FAL battalion). This unit operated on the Para-Central Front and was approximately a platoon-size element. In addition, the FAL had a unit known as the Pedro Pablo Castillo Urban Commandos that operated on the north, semiurban periphery of San Salvador and were trained in FES techniques, although their missions were more oriented toward the urban setting.

The RN had the J-27 and Unit September 15 (U-S-15) consisting of two platoons and was based on Guazapa Mountain. The PRTC didn't organize a FES platoon until 1987. This platoon operated in eastern El Salvador and was largely used to provide security for the PRTC high command. By 1988 the PRTC FES unit had approximately 30 members. The ERP formed an entire FES battalion known as the Comandante Manglio Armijo Special Troops, known by the Spanish acronym TECMA. The TECMA Battalion was distributed on three fronts. The 1st and 2nd sections were located on the Northeastern front. The 3rd section was located on the Southeastern front. The 4th section was based on the Western front. The TECMA had a total of two commanders and 240 combatants. Each section consisted of 60 combatants. High-profile attacks carried out by the ERP FES included the attack on the air force of El Salvador, the attack on the CEMFA, the first attack on the 3rd Brigade, and the second attack on the 3rd Brigade. Normally the ERP FES carried out their operations with support from the BRAZ. The basic FES missions were to conduct highly damaging, large-scale attacks. This task would be accom-

plished by a small force against a large force and the massive and effective use of explosives. One captured FES manual explained that the FES were for the FMLN the artillery and air power that it lacked. However, instead of delivery by mechanical means, high explosives were delivered on target by human beings using stealth and intelligence.

While there were minor variations from organization to organization, the FES were generally uniformed and equipped along similar lines. During penetrations and attacks the FES wore dark shorts or briefs and covered their bodies entirely with paint. There were three kinds of paint. The first was based on soot, the second on mud, and the last was called multicolored. The multicolored consisted of different colored inks mixed separately with mud and plant juice. When not on FES operations, the commandos wore standard guerrilla clothing. Efforts were made for them not to carry distinctive uniforms and equipment so that the location and movement of FES units would be harder to detect. The only equipment carried by the FES on reconnaissance operations were pistols and, in some units, knives. During an attack, commandos carried their personal weapons and a shoulder bag filled with explosives. The weapon of choice for the FES was the explosive charge, usually either 800 or 600 grams of reinforced Trotyl, which was formidable, and hand throwable. FES commandos manufactured these charges themselves. Some FES units also used standard hand grenades. Initially, FES units carried submachine guns. The ERP FES carried Uzis in their attack on the Ilopango air force base. The FPL FES carried MP-5s. FES units also carried CAR-15s, the short carbine version of the M-16. However, because an entire unit carrying submachine guns or carbines could easily be identified as a FES unit, the FES began carrying regular rifles such as M-16s, FALs, G-3s, and later on AK-47s. The RPG man carried his rocket launcher and three to four rockets. In the early part of the war these were RPG-2s, and then after 1984, the FMLN obtained RPG-7s. Some units also used LAW disposable antitank rockets and later their Soviet imitation, the RPG-18. Since the FES often conducted operations by themselves, the platoons also carried some machine guns such as the M-60, or later, the RPK and PKM. The ERP FES Battalion was equipped with 81mm mortars, 75mm and 90mm recoilless rifles, and M-79 grenade launchers.

The FES mission was to strike deep in the enemy rear. They were tasked with breaking the enemy's defenses of the cities or economic centers by the destruction of fixed, fortified positions. This includes attacking the very center of the armed forces and the government zones of control. Highly destructive attacks in the "safe areas" of the enemy would cause both physical and psychological damage. If the enemy had nowhere to rest, he would begin to lose confidence in himself and his leaders. Loss of morale would lead to loss of the war.

All the objectives of the FES were ordered by the high command of the



FES commandos training for a penetration mission. Note the similarity in appearance of these men to the Vietcong sappers.

FMLN. The FMLN high command based its orders on those objectives which would produce: the greatest political repercussions (propaganda), psychological repercussions (morale), and economic damage (if there were any), and finally would inflict the greatest military defeat on the enemy (losses of men and equipment).

The advantage of the FES was their simplicity. Essentially, they were an effective, low-tech commando force. They concentrated on a few skills that they learned to perfection and carried out with a high degree of discipline. There were two main areas of specialization: infiltration and the use and manufacture of explosive charges.

Infiltration was for two purposes. First, it was the means by which the explosives were delivered on target, and second, it was the means by which a FES unit reconnoitered a target to plan and prepare for an attack. As an outgrowth of FES infiltration skills the troops were tasked by their chain of command to conduct tactical and strategic reconnaissance for the regular guerrilla units. The key aspect of infiltration was patience. The FES commandos were taught a series of drills in which they carried out very precise physical movements to overcome any type of obstacle. They drilled in these movements so often that a FES commando would automatically use the technique when faced with an obstacle, without having to think too long about how he was going to overcome the obstacle. The FES were trained to penetrate all types of fences, wire obstacles, minefields, areas covered by bright lights, walls, ditches, and so on.

FES penetration operations were always carried out at night, when it was darkest, usually between the hours of midnight and 0200. The FES soldiers conducted penetration operations nearly naked. This was so they could better feel the obstacles they were crossing. For these missions, the guerrillas were taught to rely heavily on their tactile senses. A well-trained FES soldier could, with little difficulty, routinely penetrate an army base or position without being detected.

As mentioned previously, penetration was used both for reconnaissance and attack. Reconnaissance was considered to be the most important step because poor information could ruin an operation. The recon itself had various stages that were rigorously followed. First, a peripheral reconnaissance was carried out. Access roads, reinforcement routes, and withdrawal routes were located and noted. The FES would then conduct a visual assessment of the exterior defenses of the objective. They would then tentatively select rally and dispersion points for both the FES and support forces to take part in the attack. The FES then began probing the perimeter around the objective to find the main and secondary locations best suited for breaching the outer defenses. The positions of bunkers, fences, and minefields were noted. The FES then began to search out dead space not covered by the defenses, such as behind houses, trees, and where darkness and shadows obscured vision. They

would spend as much time as they determined necessary to conduct a thorough outside observation of an objective. When they felt they had enough information, and they had drawn an initial map, they would begin deep penetration reconnaissance missions.

This was considered most important, because the commandos would determine the likelihood of success during these missions. The precise location of the main objectives would be determined, and the position of secondary objectives would also be noted. A precise internal map would be drawn. The FES commandos would note how long it took to penetrate the objective at different locations, and timetables would be made. Contingencies were planned for. Peripheral and perimeter recons were made by lower echelons. However, in the deep recon operations, the overall commander of the operation personally led the missions into the interior of the objective.

Information that had to be compiled for an attack included: the quantity of troops, NCOs, officers, and commanders; the location of heavy equipment and assets (vehicles, planes, armored cars, etc.); the location of ammunition dumps; the location of the communications shed; the location of the barracks and officers quarters; the location of the support arms barracks; where internal defenses of the objective were located. Conditions of the objective were noted. Was the objective inside or outside the urban perimeter? What were the natural terrain features, such as rivers, ravines, and so on? What were the artificial terrain features, such as farm crops, mounds of earth, and so on? Was the first line of defense a wire fence, concertina wire, or a wall? Were there elevated guard platforms, nearby dense vegetation, trees, or thatch? What was the lighting situation of the objective? Did they have yellow lights or white lights? Were the lights fixed or mobile? Did personnel move during the late hours of the night? What were the natural noises made in each sector? What were the atmospheric conditions like? Were there rain, fog and cold, moonless nights, thunder and lightning? All of these things were noted and written down in a reconnaissance report, and those features that could be were drawn on an accurate map. The FES found that the best time for recon and attack was always between 2330 and 0230 hours, the period of night when there is the greatest cold and when humans are usually the most sleepy.

Those items that presented the greatest obstacles to FES troops included brightly lit objectives, multiple lines of defense with randomly scattered minefields, flat, open terrain, dispersed location of support weapons and equipment, mobile sentries, places with no natural noise, first line of defense consisting of tall guard posts, bunkers flush with the ground, no visible points of reference, the presence of dogs, and hidden positions.

The FES would spend months penetrating a position to find out details

that could not be determined by outside observation. It was not uncommon for a large objective to be reconnoitered over a period of several years before an attack was carried out, and most intensively for six months prior to the attack. If the army discovered FES commandos penetrating its perimeter, the FMLN did not cease planning the attack on that objective. Blowing the cover of a FES operation merely delayed the attack. The FES might cease penetration operations for several weeks, and then resume them as soon as the initial excitement had died down. Examples of this were the attacks on the CEMFA and the second attack on the 3rd Brigade. Reconnaissance was discovered for both objectives in 1982-1983. In 1985, the FES attacked the CEMFA, and in 1986 they attacked the 3rd Brigade. Few FES attacks were cancelled; they were merely delayed. The FES did not attack until they calculated they had at least a 90 percent chance of success. Therefore, thorough reconnaissance was usually considered more important than speed. As stated before, patience was key to FES operations. The strategy was Prolonged Popular War, so the FMLN could afford to wait to strike at the right moment. This, combined with tough training and self-discipline, made the low-tech FES commandos a formidable enemy.

There were three modes of attack using penetration. The first was clandestine penetration, clandestine extraction. The second was clandestine penetration, violent extraction. The third was violent penetration, violent extraction. The first mode was for clandestine attacks. The FES employed clandestine attacks in operations where the objective was to destroy enemy equipment housed in fortified bases, such as parked aircraft or vehicles, ammunition dumps, and fuel depots. A common attack using this mode of penetration was known as the "fan" method. This was used in attacks against airfields. Penetration was made at the center of the strip. The attacking unit divided into two groups. One group would then move to one end of the airfield, and the other to the opposite end. Once in position they initiated the attack inward to the point of penetration, whereupon they would exit the airfield. The objective was to maintain the secrecy of the operation until the explosives went off, destroying the equipment sometime after the guerrilla force had already made its exit. The principal weapon in this type of attack was explosives with Soviet PUT-02 time-delay fuses.

Usually, the second mode of penetration, penetrate secretly/exfiltrate violently, was the favored mode of action for a FES unit. This was used for attacks on fixed army positions with perimeter obstacles and defenses. The objective of these attacks was to annihilate enemy personnel. FES teams would infiltrate deep into the base along predetermined routes and then attack outward toward the perimeter. The months of stealthy penetration and infiltration spent on reconnoitering an objective were finally put to use, and what might have taken six months of patient re-

connaissance would be over in a few violent minutes. Attacking from the center out had several advantages. Normally, bases are set up so that the most vulnerable and important equipment or personnel are placed in the center, with defenses on the perimeter to stand between them and the enemy. This would include command personnel, communications, and heavy weapons. By eliminating these elements first, the FES would effectively cut off command, control, and support for the remaining elements within an army camp. The second purpose for attacking from the center out to the periphery was to disorient and frustrate the defensive plan of the objective. Most defensive works face outward, not inward, and have little if no protection to the rear. Attacking from behind took advantage of this vulnerability and allowed the FES commandos to make their escape by blasting a path through the rear of the defensive perimeter back out to safe territory. This technique against fortified positions was known to the FES as the "flower" method. This attack was usually carried out in conjunction with a regular guerrilla unit with artillery. If, when the operation was discovered, the FES commandos were still located inside the objective or perimeter of the objective, support artillery would go into action to distract and confuse the garrison, allowing the FES to exit the objective.

The final mode of penetration, violent in and violent out, was used when conditions didn't allow for secret penetration. Usually, this would be lightly defended objectives located in towns. However, it could also be used for attacks on larger objectives. Attacks of this nature were only carried out when there was 100 percent knowledge of the enemy forces at the objective. This mode of attack was always carried out with popular artillery support, ramps, mortars, and rifle grenades. In this case, FES units almost always operated in combination with regular units. The regular units would lay down a heavy barrage on the objective to pin down the enemy defenders. While they were hunkered down in their bunkers and trenches, the FES would rapidly penetrate and blast a path through the defenders to the center of the objective. Here they would attack command, control, and support elements and then withdraw, blasting their way back out.

In general, FES attacks were composed of the following elements: a shock and assault group, a support and distraction group, and a security and protection group. The shock and assault group was composed of one or more teams. FES teams usually consisted of at least four men. The four elements were the team commander, the rocket launcher operator (RPG man), the explosives man, and the support man. Additional teams of two could be added to the team. These were further pairs of explosives men and support men, according to the needs of the mission. The team minus the RPG man would penetrate the perimeter. This man would remain near the point of penetration where he had a good field of fire,

and could support the rest of the team. The team leader would remain at a point between the RPG man and the remainder of the team. The explosives man and the support man would approach the objective: usually a bunker, trench, or barracks building. The RPG could either facilitate the approach of the team (violent penetration) or act as an alternative means of destroying the objective, should plans go awry. This might occur if the explosives/support pair were discovered prematurely and fired on. At the given signal, the explosives man would circle the objective and hurl in several 800-gram explosive charges through the windows and other openings of the objective. He would be careful to first check that these were not covered by some type of wire mesh or screening. As soon as he finished he was to take cover and allow the charges to explode. As soon as they finished exploding, the support man was to jump up and use his rifle or submachine gun to spray each of the openings with gunfire. If he heard any movement or return fire, he was to hurl additional 600-gram charges through the openings. FES standard operating procedure was to never leave any enemy personnel in an attacked position alive. Since their technique was to blast a path through the objective, they could not afford to leave survivors along the path that might fire on their backs and impede the mission. If the explosives man was killed or injured, the support man would take over his mission, and if the support man was killed or injured, the explosives man would carry out both missions. Once the attack was carried out, the explosives team was to return to the team leader and report on the status of the attack. The team leader would then give further orders and communicate the status of the mission and his decision to the overall FES commander. Since the FES avoided carrying excess equipment, including radios, this was usually done in person.

The distraction and support group could either consist of FES personnel or regular personnel. The size and composition of this force varied greatly from mission to mission. They always carried machine guns and some form of artillery (mortars, recoilless rifles, rifle grenades, or ramps). Sometimes, missions called for these groups to lay down distracting fire on the enemy perimeter. Other times, they were to remain silent and hidden from the enemy, unless the FES group inside the objective ran into trouble. A third option was that once the FES attack had been carried out, the distraction and support unit would assault through and capture the objective.

The security group provided rear security for the entire operation. It could be composed of FES, regular, or militia personnel. The mission was to guard the flanks of the operation and the predesignated rallying points for when the mission had terminated. This was accomplished by setting up ambushes along the main routes of access and positions on

the dominating heights in the area. They were to protect the operation from relief forces coming by either land or air.

An idea of how the FES organized for an attack can be gleaned from the following document, captured from the ERP FES in Morazan.

Platoon Mission

The mission for platoon #2 of the 1st TECMA company is the assault and annihilation of the CEMFA command post located in La Union Department.

The main objective of attack is the annihilation of the command post. Secondary objectives include the Fonseca Battalion barracks where the 2/4 company is located as well as the arms room of the Fonseca Battalion.

Forces available are the 2nd FES platoon, 1st TECMA company of eleven highly technically skilled men, with some combat experience and high morale. Attached to the platoon is a seven-man squad of the BRAZ with some technical skills and high combat morale. The weapons assigned to this force include automatic rifles such as M-16, G-3, and Galil.

Individual Team Missions

The mission of team #1 of platoon #2 is to annihilate the command post and if there is opportunity, to capture the position.

This team is composed of the following comrades:

- Chamorro
- Julio
- Alejo
- Tito

This team has the following weapons:

- 6 large six-stick charges
- 8 800-gram charges
- 1 rifle for each combatant with 175 rounds, and
- 4 magazines for each rifle

Individual Missions

Chamorro, the team leader, will kill the sentry at the command post and will be the one who will support the explosives man (*Alejo*) while he throws his charges into the building. After having thrown the large explosives, Chamorro will finish the job with rifle fire. If there is any resistance, Chamorro will throw the small, 800-gram charges to end this. While Chamorro throws the explosives, *Alejo* will cover.

Tito's mission will be to wipe out the soldiers that are in the trench next to

the command post. He will open fire with his rifle and provide support so Julio can drop an 800-gram explosive into the trench.

Julio's mission will be to drop the explosive into the trench, and also be the team runner.

Team Communications System

All of the team leaders will, when the mission is completed, send a runner to report to the commander on the status of the situation: whether the mission has been completed, or there are problems. At this point, depending on the situation, higher command will give new orders as to what should be done.

Mission for Team #2 of Platoon #2

The mission for this team is to attack and annihilate the barracks of the Fonseca Battalion's 2/4 company.

This team is composed of the following comrades:

- Rommel
- Yovani
- Yimi
- Daniel

This team has the following weapons:

- 3 6-stick charges
- 6 800-gram charges
- 1 RPG-7 with four rockets
- 1 9mm pistol with 18 rounds and two magazines
- 1 Galil rifle with 175 rounds and 4 magazines
- 1 M-16 rifle with 175 rounds and 4 magazines

Individual Missions

Rommel, the team leader, will annihilate the sentry at this barracks and will support *Yovani*, who will throw explosives through the doors. At this barracks, the explosives will be thrown through the back doors and Rommel will support *Yovani* by covering the main door with his rifle.

Daniel, as he is not carrying large charges, will use his rifle to provide automatic fire at the doors so no one will come out through them. After the large charges are thrown, he will move up to finish off the barracks with small charges.

Yimi will carry the RPG-7. From the 2/4 barracks he will fire at the barracks of the Fonseca Battalion 1/3 company. He will fire two rockets in quick succession and then wait for the enemy reaction. Depending on the enemy reaction, he will fire a third rocket, and save the last one for an emergency reserve.

Subgroup Mission

This will be *Rene*. His mission is to kill any group of soldiers in the first barracks. He will then occupy this position and fire on approaching enemy troops until ordered otherwise. It is assumed that this barracks is empty.

Order of March

Will be as follows: Team #1, Chamorro's team, will be responsible for opening a hole so the rest of the force can enter. His team will be followed by the BRAZ squad. This squad will set up outside the CEMFA perimeter and fire on the trenches to cover Chamorro's team so that they can break through the outer fences. Following the BRAZ squad will be team #2, Rommel's team. This team will penetrate deep into the enemy position. Each rifle will be issued 175 rounds and 4 magazines.

Tactics

Approach secretly to the edge of the fence to guarantee opening the breach without being detected. Once the opening is made, wait at this place until the assigned hour of attack. At that moment, the comrades from the BRAZ will open fire against their two assigned trenches. This will be their mission. The fence will be breached at the front so that from here the teams assigned to attack the already mentioned objectives can enter violently.⁹

This operations order illustrates the size and composition of FES teams. It must be remembered that this is a platoon operations order, and that an entire company of FES and a battalion of the BRAZ participated in the operation. However, it gives a good picture of the individual missions, tactics, armaments, and communications of the FES. In addition, it shows how FES units were supposed to operate in conjunction with distraction forces. To further illustrate some of these principles, the following experience is illuminating.

Experience of December 12, 1985

On December 12, 1985, after a long period of preparation, the Lieutenant Cruz Carabante FES unit (J-28) carried out an important operation against the enemy units and the Acahuapa coffee mill. This was the first operation of this type carried out, and the first of its type carried out by this unit. It took place during a general offensive in the Chichontepec volcano region. It was carried out quickly, with no significant mistakes.

The Acahuapa coffee mill is the most important mill in San Vicente and the Para-Central region. It belongs to the Cristiani family. (*Author's note:* Alfredo Cristiani was elected president of El Salvador in March 1988). Because of FMLN

sabotage attacks on the Molinero coffee mill, the enemy began to guard the Acahuapa mill.

Through reconnaissance the guerrillas discovered that the 5th Brigade in San Vicente placed a platoon under a lieutenant and three corporals to guard the installation. They carried M-16s, two M-60s, a 60mm mortar, one M-79 grenade launcher, and a PRC 77 radio. This platoon was relieved every fifteen days. During the reconnaissance operations the army troops behaved differently. Some were totally quiet while others made noise and even fired a few shots.

The enemy troops were distributed as follows. Fifteen men were in trenches on the edge of an open space. This was the southernmost position. Their fortifications were connected by communication trenches and they lived in tents in between the trenches. A sentry was placed in the south corner of the trench.

The command post was in a brick house in the middle of the area. Near the command post (about 25 meters from the mill) was another guard post. It was believed that four persons occupied this house, including a medical sergeant, a radioman, and the radioman's assistants.

A second trench was built near a church to the southeast of the mill. Here it was believed that fifteen men or more were stationed. This position was similar to the first. The guard was located right next to the church. The church had electricity and there was a house on the road approaching the mill.

The mill was not guarded internally. However, it was well lit, which added to its protection. Around it was a wall of brick and cement. The machinery was located next to the wall in the first gallery. It could be located from the outside because a ventilation pipe was situated at this point. During the reconnaissance missions the guerrillas were able to crawl right up and look inside the trenches, but not the mill.

After a thorough reconnaissance was made, an accurate map drawn, and all of the data compiled, the guerrillas launched the attack. At 0100 hours on December 12, the mission began. All 27 members of the FPL Lieutenant Cruz Carabante FES unit participated, supported by two squads of the ATS battalion.

Over 60 grenades were used, a mix of industrial, homemade, and rifle grenades. Four 4-kilo explosive charges and two 6-kilo explosive charges were used for sabotage.

The mission began with an RPG-7 attack at 0100 on the command post. The rocket was fired at a range of 40 meters and hit the target. Immediately upon impact, two FES comrades ran toward the house and threw in grenades. The first man threw in his grenades, while the second man covered him, and then the second man threw in his grenades while the first man covered him. They were there for two minutes as planned, and then withdrew. Four bodies were seen in the house. After they had withdrawn, the RPG operator saw some soldiers run up to the house by means of a communication trench that connected the building to the main trench, located 25 meters to the north. The RPG gunner fired another rocket at the house to deal with the new arrivals. The soldiers then retreated from the house, and at 0110 the FES team withdrew from this area.

The FES group assigned the attack on the trenches was split into two groups, which took up their predesignated positions. When the RPG rocket exploded against the house, each subgroup attacked its respective positions. One advanced from south to north, and the other from east to west. Each group carried



FMLN strategic mobile force guerrillas of the FPL preparing to fire homemade rifle grenades like those used at the Acahuapa coffee mill.

fifteen grenades. In four minutes all the grenades were thrown. Six grenades proved to be duds. The fuses went off but failed to ignite the explosive. After five minutes the comrades withdrew.

Two comrades of the FES guided a squad of the ATS to the trench near the house. The trench was quiet except for a wounded soldier who moaned in pain. An M-60, two M-16s, and ammunition were captured. This squad remained in the trench for twenty minutes until it received the order to assault the command house. As it advanced, it was met by rifle and grenade fire from the trench, 25 meters from the house. It retreated because it was already 0150, past the hour to retire.

The trench near the church and the guard post were attacked. At first the canvas tents were attacked by a FES subgroup with 30 grenades. All were thrown. Two grenadiers attacked the flanks and the support position in the middle. Everything was over by 0110. However, most of the grenades failed to explode. The guerrillas had to retire without taking the trench, but the enemy suffered a number of dead and wounded. The subgroup attacking the guard post was surprised when it ran into five soldiers instead of one, as had been expected. This prevented the elimination of the guard post with rifle fire; the subgroup opted

to fire rifle grenades. This killed two soldiers instantly and damaged the houses and the church. After this the comrades withdrew. The reserve squad of the ATS moved up to take the trench but was unable to do so because its grenades failed to detonate (they were homemade, fuse-lit grenades). This squad retired at 0200 hours.

There was a stop group next to the trench and next to the church that wasn't able to join the action. It was between trench #2 and the mill in the coffee field.

There was a group that was acting as security for the sabotage group. It was divided into two groups and was located on the road between San Vicente and Verapaz. The other was located to the west of the mill with two comrades in each subgroup.

The sabotage group of four FES comrades placed a 6-kilo charge on the southern side of the wall surrounding the mill. This charge failed to blow a hole in the wall. Another 4-kilo charge was placed and this charge did blow a hole in the wall through which the sabotage group entered. At 0115 the group reached the machinery. A 4-kilo charge was placed but the blasting cap failed to detonate. A 6-kilo charge was then placed on the main machine and destroyed it. After this the team found gasoline and spread it on the coffee sacks and started a fire. At 0140 this group retired through the breach it had made for initial penetration. This team withdrew through the position of the security team, who then followed it, and both withdrew through the position of the trench stop group, who then lifted its position and followed them.

The command post was located 200 meters east of trench #2, in the coffee field from where the ATS squad had come to clean up the trench after the initial attack.

The general retreat was made at 0200 without any problems. The enemy reinforcements arrived at 0230, coming from the Panamerican highway. They unloaded from their trucks on the highway and reached the mill on foot.

Cooperation of Other Forces

To complete this action a squad maintained security on the road from San Vicente to Cayetano at the La Quinta Hacienda. This squad was in place from 0100 to 0400 hours. Another squad was placed on the road from San Vicente that goes through Barrio Concepcion.

Two squads were placed to stop the paramilitary forces from Candelaria and Tepetitan. One squad each was placed on the road leading to the military position. These forces retreated at 0230 hours.

A squad of the MPL was at the Acahaupa station from 0100 to 0200 hours with the mission to provide transport.

Results

- Two M-16s, one M-60, and 4000 rounds of 5.56 and 7.62mm were captured in addition to packs, uniforms, and other items.
- Eighteen casualties were inflicted including 9 killed and 9 wounded.

- The guerrillas suffered two men lightly wounded.
- The central machine of the coffee mill was destroyed.

Notes

- The missions assigned to the comrades of the Lieutenant Cruz Carabante J-28 FES platoon were accomplished.
- The general failure of the explosives was the principal problem of the operation, especially the detonators.
- The time planned for the operation was exceeded by one hour.
- During the withdrawal, too much time was spent at Hacienda El Carmen, from 0500 to 1400 hours.
- The combination of commandos and regular soldiers was done in an effective manner.
- An effective defeat was inflicted on the enemy while he maintained pressure on the zone of the Chichontepec volcano.¹⁰

This experience shows how FES principles were implemented in operations. The guerrillas' analysis of their experience is very good. What was not noted, however, was how the FES units reacted positively in the face of unexpected obstacles. The FES elements seemed to react better than the regular guerrillas. This was to be expected. Even though all of the objectives were not accomplished, the guerrillas kept their focus on supporting the main effort, the destruction of the mill machinery, which was accomplished. When difficulty was experienced with the failure of explosives and grenades, the FES elements improvised and used gasoline and rifle grenades. Some of the unexpected circumstances appeared to arise as a failure of intelligence. These and other minor failures could be accounted for by the fact that this J-28 platoon had just finished training, and this was its first operation. However, other circumstances were due to the normal fog of war. One can never predict exactly how an enemy will react. For a first operation, things went remarkably well for the Lieutenant Cruz Carabante platoon. Like all special units, their training allowed them to overcome difficulties and accomplish the mission successfully.

Because of their training and spirit, the FES were formidable opponents throughout the war. They were effective without the use of high-tech gadgets common to special forces in the modern world. The lesson to be gleaned is that while high-tech gadgets can definitely enhance a special forces operation, the real difference between special forces and regular forces is their basic level of training and motivation. Special forces soldiers are superior because they practice basic skills over and over again until these skills become second nature. Technologically superior equipment merely enhances special skills. The FMLN FES were the embodi-

ment of this lesson. Because of this, low-tech, FES-type units are likely to appear in future low-intensity conflicts.

NOTES

1. This chapter has been gleaned from a number of FMLN documents listed below:

ERP, *Preparación de Fuerzas Especiales* (El Salvador, n.d.), captured from guerrillas in August 1988.

FMLN, *Manual de Instrucción Para los Comandos Urbanos No. 2: El Explosivo Como Arma Popular* (El Salvador: Publicaciones FMLN, 1987), captured from guerrillas in 1989.

FPL, *Curso de Comandos J-28* (El Salvador, n.d.), captured from guerrillas in 1989.

RN, *Plan de Adiestramiento FES de las FARN-RN* (El Salvador, n.d.), captured from guerrillas in March 1988.

FPL, *Apuntes de Reunión Objetivos con David: FES*. (El Salvador, April 15, 1981), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

FPL, *Proyecto para el Destacamento de Operaciones Especiales* (El Salvador, August 1980), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

David Spencer, *FMLN FES: Fight Much With Little* (Provo, Utah: unpublished manuscript, 1990).

Unknown FPL Guerrilla, *Diary of FMLN Commando Course* (El Salvador, July 7, 1989), document captured from guerrillas in 1989.

For information accessible in the United States:

Major Victor M. Rosello, U.S. Army, "Vietnam's Support to El Salvador's FMLN: Successful Tactics in Central America," *Military Review* (January 1990): 71-78.

2. FPL, *Notes of Meeting with David: About Special Select Forces (FES) 15 April 1981*, captured by the armed forces in 1981 or 1982.

3. Comrade Luis, FPL, *Reports to Comrade Germán* (April 1981-August 1981). Series of daily reports on situation of Luis' command to Comrade German. Captured from guerrillas in 1981.

4. FMLN, *Para el Jefe del Frente Felipe Peña: Sobre la Situación de Volcán* (El Salvador, 1981), FMLN document captured after the 1981 offensive.

5. Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia, *Informes Sobre el Puente de Oro* (El Salvador, 1981).

6. Jo Thomas, "Puerto Rico Group Says It Struck Jets: Emblems of Matcheteros Found at Site of Time-Bomb Attack," *New York Times*, January 13, 1981: A1, A12.

7. FMLN, *Linea Militar del FMLN: Reunión Comandancia Mayo-Junio Morazan 1985* (El Salvador: Editorial Revolucionaria del Pueblo Ernesto Amaya Sistema Venceremos FMLN, 1986), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

8. Interview with FAL FES defector, San Salvador, March 1990.

9. ERP, *Orden de Combate No. 1* (El Salvador, 1985). Operations order to attack CEMFA, captured from guerrillas in May 1986.

10. FPL, *Principales Experiencias Operativas de la D.A. #2 del Año 1985* (San Vicente, El Salvador: Ediciones Chinchontepec Heróico, 1986).

FMLN Battle Tactics

OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS

The FMLN developed a number of unique offensive and defensive tactics. Between 1980 and December 1986, each front developed its own tactics, usually in response to army operations in that area. Some tactics, such as the massive use of mines, were common to all of the organizations. In December 1986, the FMLN high command held a meeting in which it unified its efforts in an attempt to develop the basis to precipitate what it called the Strategic Counter-Offensive. The Strategic Counter-Offensive was to be the definitive battle that would propel the FMLN to total military victory. The organizations that promoted these tactical changes and developments within the FMLN were the FPL and the ERP, as they were the groups with the most personnel and the greatest experience. The strategic military guidelines of the FMLN high command in this meeting became the model for tactics employed on all of the war fronts. As a result, the tactics of all of the guerrilla organizations became uniform across the country. In addition to preparations for the Strategic Counter-Offensive, uniformity of tactics was due in part to the gradual loss of the most experienced combatants, the migration of masses, for various reasons, from the most conflictive zones, and the increasing capacity of the army to conduct airmobile operations. While guerrilla tactics in the beginning of the war differed from front to front and from organization to organization, the greater unity of the FMLN and other factors after 1986 produced a uniformity of guerrilla tactics that continued through the end of the war.

FMLN military tactics were subject to certain variables such as the cat-

egory of the combat unit: special forces, mobile forces, local guerrillas, or the militias; the logistical capacity of each organization; the nature of the objective, whether it was mobile troops, permanent installation, or fixed positions; and the conditions of the terrain, especially the level of vegetation cover in the area of operations.

GUERRILLA OPERATIONS

The FMLN grouped its irregular tactics into four categories: offensive, defensive, sabotage, and mass action. Offensive guerrilla tactics included incursions and assaults, coups de main, the night maneuver, ambush and maneuver (annihilation ambush), set-up ambushes, ambushes combined with prolonged harassment of a fixed position, and ambush and assault. To the FMLN, offensive operations were designed to consolidate guerrilla control over the war fronts and to annihilate the combat forces of the army. The military guidelines for these operations were based on the continually adjusting military strategy formulated by the FMLN high command.

The Incursion or Assault

Among the offensive operations carried out by the FMLN was the classic guerrilla incursion. This was an attack by strategic mobile units against military or paramilitary (National Guard, Treasury Police, National Police, Civil Defense) posts in a populated town or village. The objective was to carry out a public demonstration of guerrilla might by taking control of a town. In addition, their intent was to destroy the security forces, capture weapons, physically demonstrate the weakness of the government by attacking government infrastructure and representatives, and conduct a political rally to deliver the guerrilla political message to the people. In the early part of the war, the FMLN conducted incursions in much the same manner that guerrilla forces throughout Latin America, since the 1959 Cuban revolution, had done.

The Classical Model

Usually, the guerrilla forces planned their incursions several months in advance. Civilian sympathizers, or guerrillas dressed as civilians, gathered intelligence on the location and characteristics of targets. Desired information included the location of all military or paramilitary installations, the government phone company offices, administrative offices such as the town hall, banks, locales of anti-guerrilla political parties, the residences of prominent rich people, political figures, and so on. The number of personnel, weaponry, and the daily habits of these targets would

be noted and confirmed over time. When all of the information was gathered, the guerrillas would plan their attack. Basically, tasks would be divided among an assault group, a security group, and a propaganda group. The assault group was divided into several subunits to attack the various targets. The security group was also divided into several subgroups to protect the assault group from enemy reinforcement. All of the major, and the most important minor, routes in and out of the town were covered by security teams. The propaganda group developed a plan to politicize the masses. They might create banners, posters, or billboards to post around the town. Often the guerrillas carried leaflets with them, for distribution to the townspeople. Usually, a megaphone was also carried to better deliver a previously prepared speech. Assembly points, routes of entry and withdrawal, and rally points were all designated prior to the incursion. A few hours before the incursion, which usually began at midnight, the guerrillas set up roadblocks around the town. Here the security groups stopped all traffic and set up ambushes to prevent anyone from going in or out of the town. Depending on the plan, the security group also confiscated vehicles to transport the guerrillas into town. Cargo trucks with tarpaulins were usually preferred, because the guerrillas could remain hidden until after they had penetrated the town. The assault group then made its way into town, by foot or vehicle, according to the plan and the availability of transportation. The guerrillas often cut off the town's electrical power before the attack to make it more difficult for the enemy to see. However, to avoid alerting the town defenders, the guerrillas often waited until the assault teams were in position around their objectives before cutting off the power. The guerrillas might also cut the phone lines to prevent the defenders from calling in reinforcements. The main objective was always the military or paramilitary installation. This was surrounded and attacked with concentrated rifle and machine gun fire. Often ramps, rifle grenades, or tubeless artillery were employed. Later, the FMLN used FES units as much as possible to clear the way for the mobile forces to mop up. After the military and paramilitary installations were neutralized or destroyed, the guerrillas would then attack the other targets. This included rounding up all the off-duty military and paramilitary personnel, kidnapping or assassinating the mayor, the leaders of the anti-guerrilla political parties, wealthy townspeople, and so on. The guerrillas destroyed the phone company locale and the power grid. They sacked and burned the bank, town hall, and political party headquarters. After all of the objectives were secured, the guerrillas rounded up the townspeople and conducted a political rally. Banners and posters were hung, graffiti painted on the walls, and leaflets distributed. The population was harangued about the evils of the government and the virtue of the guerrilla cause. The guerrillas called for recruits who were immediately and publicly incorporated into the col-

umn, and then the population was asked to point out those people who were government sympathizers. The signalled people were usually taken prisoner, interrogated, and then shot. The guerrillas stayed in the town as long as they could, only leaving when the security groups signalled the elements in the town that they could no longer contain the army forces coming to retake the town. At this point, the guerrillas withdrew, leaving the army to fall on an empty and destroyed town. The guerrillas hoped that the army would then take vengeance on the defenseless civilians. This would reinforce the guerrilla message delivered at the rally and create a ready source of guerrilla recruits. Two examples of the classical model of incursion are provided by the following guerrilla narratives.

Attack On Tecoluca, January 10, 1981

The comrades started their approach just as planned. The operation was led by comrade Chico. Ambushes were set up on the roads into town, particularly the road from San Vicente. The strongest military garrison was located in that city; therefore it was the most likely route along which reinforcements would travel. The assault group made its way silently toward the National Guard Post. The plan was to surround it and take it by siege. The fighting started at 1700 hours. The fight became very fierce as the enemy was able to locate an H&K 21 machine gun in a very strategic location, where it could not be put out of action. However, despite this, the comrades were aggressive and inflicted heavy casualties on the defenders. Still, because of the machine gun, they were not able to take the position. Meanwhile, the guerrillas called for the population to come out of their houses. They were able to muster about 150 militia members, masses, and comrades. But the majority of the people shut their doors and remained inside. The group of masses and militia marched and yelled slogans throughout the town as the fighting at the National Guard Post continued. In addition, they made barricades and dug trenches. By 0200, there were only about five National Guardsmen still resisting from the post. Suddenly, from the direction of San Vicente, an armored vehicle and a heavily armed group of soldiers burst into the guerrilla perimeter and began to lay down heavy fire on the guerrilla positions. There was great confusion and panic among the guerrilla forces. The commander, Comrade Chico, was at the first aid station when the armored vehicle began its onslaught. He saw the panic, and immediately ran out, trying to keep his forces organized to face the new threat. As he ran about, he was shot by the armored vehicle. The second in command did not take control of the situation and all of the comrades fled, abandoning the town. One guerrilla was killed and three were wounded, including the leader of the operation, who was only lightly wounded. How the army had managed to slip the armored vehicle and infantry force past the guerrilla ambush was not discovered until the after-action analysis. The army had taken control of a Red Cross vehicle and sent men ahead in the vehicle to reconnoiter the route into town. Once they had accomplished this mission, they returned to San Vicente.



FMLN guerrillas laying siege to a military post of a small town like Tocoluca in 1981. Note the civilian clothing, the hodgepodge of weapons: M-1 Garand, FN FAL, a Madsen M50 submachine gun, and a homemade mortar of dubious quality. The man in the center is about to light the homemade mortar with a Bic cigarette lighter.

Here, the army commandeered a couple of semitrucks used to transport the sugarcane harvest. They loaded the armored vehicle onto the truck and hid it under a layer of sugarcane. The soldiers hid in a second truck, and these drove past the guerrilla checkpoint without being stopped. The guerrillas were assigned the mission of ambushing only military traffic, so they let the trucks go. At a point out of sight from the town, and out of sight from the ambush site, the army unloaded the armored vehicle and made its way quietly into town without being detected.¹

San Isidro Labor, April 3, 1982

On April 3, 1982, units of the FES and two platoons of regular forces took San Isidro Labor, Chalatenango. This town is eighteen kilometers north of Chalatenango City along the road to San Jose Las Flores. San Isidro Labor was a jumping-off point for many of the army's offensives into Chalatenango, and a key point of access to San Antonio de la Cruz, Nueva Trinidad, Nombre de Jesus, and Arcatao, near which the guerrillas had many camps. Taking San Isidro Labor would mean cutting off the ground route to this area, making it accessible only by helicopter. The defenders of the town consisted of 50 soldiers and paramilitaries armed with M-16s, G-3s, and M-1 carbines. They also had M-79 grenade launchers, a 90mm cannon, a .30 caliber and M-60 machine gun, and an 81mm mortar. Three times a week, a helicopter came to the town to deliver supplies.

The mission to take the barracks was assigned to German. The forces consisted of FES, regular units, and popular militias. The latter were assigned to set up roadblocks and ambushes outside the town and sabotage the electrical lines. On the night of April 2, the guerrillas took up strategic positions around the town. At midnight the FES moved in to annihilate the sentries and outposts of the first lines of defense. Simultaneously, the lights were cut by the militia. The FES were able to easily annihilate the outer sentries and blockhouses. This opened the way for the regular units (two platoons) to move in behind and surround the barracks. When the guerrillas reached their position, a furious fight began with the defenders. Initially, the soldiers responded with fire from the machine guns and recoilless cannon. They managed to pin down the guerrillas with fire from their M-60 machine gun. The soldiers used their 90mm cannon, but the rounds fell short. The M-60 machine gun was knocked out by direct hits with RPG-2 rockets, while the FES managed to knock out the .30 caliber gun with hand-thrown blocks of TNT. This allowed the guerrillas to maneuver, but the soldiers resisted to the very end with grenades and artillery fire. At 0400 resistance ceased. The army suffered 35 killed, and five captured. The guerrillas lost five comrades. After the barracks were taken, the population were gathered and comrade German spoke to them about the strength and just cause of the revolution.²

Simultaneous Incursions

As the war progressed, the armed forces withdrew from towns that could easily be cut off from reinforcement, increased the garrisons and

security measures in the towns they held, increased the fortification of the installations within the town, and began developing methods of relieving the besieged defenders with airpower and airmobile reinforcements. The armed forces also developed tactics to rapidly reinforce any single attacked town by land. The guerrillas developed two variations of the incursion in an attempt to defeat the army's new measures. The first method was to attack multiple targets simultaneously. In other words, instead of attacking one town, the FMLN would attack the government installations in several towns at once. Only one or two of the attacks would be real objectives, while the rest of the attacks would merely be harassing operations by small forces. However, by attacking multiple targets, the armed forces could never be sure which point needed reinforcements first, until some time had passed, and they were able to monitor the extent of the attacks at each objective and determine where the real attack was developing. The guerrillas hoped that it would take the army enough time to figure this out that they would be able to conclude their attack before army reinforcements could be sent. Furthermore, the FMLN usually designed its harassing and diversionary attacks to act as a series of layered buffers and delays to prevent the armed forces from reaching the main attack. Each few minutes of delay increased the chances for success of the primary FMLN attack. The following example illustrates this method.

Destruction of the Finca El Pinar Civil Defense Post (August 22, 1985)

On August 10, 1985, a mission was received by group #1 of the U-24 FES commandos to attack the Civil Defense positions at the Pinar and Granadillas farms located on the San Salvador volcano. The mission was to be carried out on August 20, 1985. The order included detailed information on the strength, composition, and position of the government forces. This mission was to be the main focus of a series of coordinated attacks against army posts at El Matazano hamlet, jurisdiction of San Juan Opico, Department of La Libertad, and San Juan de Los Planes. The latter objectives would be attacked simultaneously by forces of other organizations; the ERP at El Matazano and the FPL at San Juan de Los Planes.

The objective of attacking the two positions at the Pinar and Granadillas farms was to annihilate the members of the Civil Defense and to recuperate war materiel. The strategic objective of this attack was to support expansion activities on the San Salvador volcano, because the government positions here were an obstacle to expansion work in this area. Up to now, the chief of expansion could only move with great difficulty to carry out his work.

The same day the order was received, four Special Forces troops of the U-24 were sent to the San Salvador volcano to reconnoiter the objectives and confirm the information that had been included in the original order. Old information

was confirmed and new information added to the target dossier. A total of ten FES members and ten members of COBRAC (Commandos of the Rafael Aguiñada Carranza Battalion), supported logistically by expansion units in this sector, were assigned to make the attack. This group reached the San Salvador volcano on August 12, and set up camp at the Mirasol farm. This group carried out its own recon on August 15, and another on August 18. When all the preparations were finalized, a message was sent, on August 18, to the FAL commander, Ramon Suarez, on Guazapa hill, containing the following information: (1) The operation was confirmed for August 22, 1985 at midnight; (2) it was requested that the remainder of the assigned personnel and their weapons be sent for the attack; (3) a request was made for a medic to be sent with this personnel.

The overall commander of the operation was Lieutenant Manuelon, who was the BRAC 1st company leader. The remainder of the personnel that were to participate in the operation arrived on August 21, 1985. Four members of U-24 and eight of COBRAC would attack the Pinar farm. The Granadillas farm would be attacked by four from U-24 commandos and nine COBRAC guerrillas. The total number of combatants was 25. The attack was to start at midnight of the 22nd, and go no later than 0200 hours of the 23rd.

The result of these attacks was the destruction and burning of the local command post at Pinar farm as well as the death of three Civil Defense members. Two G-3 rifles were recovered. The attack on the Granadillas farm failed. The attackers met stiff resistance from the defenders, who holed up in an impregnable bunker. When the attacking force had not been able to dislodge the defenders by 0200 hours, they withdrew. One guerrilla was killed at Granadillas farm, and one wounded at Pinar farm. The dead guerrilla's M-16 was lost at Granadillas.

At the other objectives, El Matazano and San Juan de Los Planes, the attacks were carried out at 2200 hours on the 22nd and finalized at midnight on the 22nd, the battles lasting around two hours.³

CONCENTRATION AND DECONCENTRATION

The second method developed by the FMLN to counter the army's new tactics was that of concentration and deconcentration. The armed forces, through the use of the air force, the Immediate Reaction Battalions, PRAL companies, and radio-location finding equipment, were able to detect and destroy massed guerrilla formations. Attacking single towns with a large force, and then maintaining that force as one single unit, became suicidal for the FMLN. The guidelines from the 1985 FMLN high command meeting called for the guerrillas to disperse the strategic mobile battalions into platoon-size elements. However, the FMLN also felt that having the capability to quickly mass these units for a large-scale, hard-hitting attack should be maintained. In other words, even though the FMLN moved away from conventional warfare and returned to guerrilla warfare, it decided not to waste all of the conven-

tional experience by continuing plans for the massing of guerrilla units for conventional attacks against fixed targets. However, to avoid destruction, the FMLN force had to avoid being detected prior to the attack, and had to rapidly disperse after an attack. This was the principle of concentration and deconcentration. What it meant in terms of incursions was that the political indoctrination portion of the attack was almost entirely abandoned. There might be time to hang a banner, put up some posters, and scatter some leaflets, but no more. This was because after the military objectives were taken, the force needed to disperse quickly to avoid suffering heavy casualties at the hands of the air force and the elite units.

What both the tactics of multiple objectives and concentration and deconcentration had in common was the need for intricate control, coordination, and planning. Very specific orders had to be given to widely dispersed units to show up at exactly the right place, at exactly the right time, and with the appropriate equipment and understanding of mission orders. To do this, FMLN commanders needed to know exactly where each of their units was at any particular time, and what its status was in terms of personnel, capabilities, and weapons. Since the various guerrilla units did not stay in permanent base camps for more than fifteen days at a time, and were in constant movement, the control of these elements for concentration and deconcentration was a military feat not equalled by many modern professional armies. The key ingredients were good communications (FMLN communications will be described in a later section) and sufficient time for thorough planning. It took a lot of time to adequately plan either a simultaneous objective or a concentration and deconcentration operation. However, many of the attacks that were made were in response to government actions or other tactical and strategic needs of the moment. How did the FMLN put together such complicated operations in such a short time? The answer is that it didn't. From the very beginning of the war, the FMLN worked to develop a dossier on different targets that it anticipated might be important to attack at any given time. These dossiers were constantly updated and changed as the situation changed. Therefore, operations that seemed to have been planned in only days had in actuality been in the planning stage for months, and even years. Furthermore, if the armed forces discovered the FMLN's plans to attack a certain objective, the plans were laid aside, but never discarded. As soon as the situation returned to normal, the FMLN would begin the planning process again. At any given time, it had available a whole range of targets that it could attack, and a whole series of contingencies it could consider, depending on the situation. In this sense, the FMLN as a guerrilla force was highly developed in terms of intelligence,

staff work, planning, communications, and operational control. Although it was not a highly technical force, it was highly disciplined, a fact that often made up for its technical deficiencies on the battlefield.

CERRO EL MONO, 1988: DECONCENTRATION AND CONCENTRATION

The army was conducting offensive operations against the guerrillas in Morazan and around El Tigre Hill, further to the west. In a 72-hour period, the guerrillas from these areas dispersed and made their way south to Jucuaran to a camp called Los Jobos. Here, in a matter of hours, they concentrated and launched an assault against the repeater station on El Mono Hill. This installation was guarded by a platoon of men from the 6th Brigade. In a lightning attack, the guerrillas overran the station, killing nearly all of the defenders. Only two or three survived. The guerrillas captured the defenders' mortars and heavy weapons and then withdrew. The air force had been scrambled to attack the withdrawing guerrilla forces. Knowing that the guerrillas had concentrated at Los Jobos to launch the attack, and calculating time to intercept, the pilots were vectored directly to the location of the Los Jobos camp. However, by the time they reached it, it was completely empty. The guerrillas had split up immediately after the attack and scattered to the various other guerrilla camps deep within the Jucuaran mangrove swamps.⁴

The Coup de Main

Another important tactic developed by the FMLN is what the guerrillas called the "coup de main." This was an attempted surprise attack employing high levels of violence and rapid movement to quickly decide the outcome of the battle. Coups de main were carried out against fixed or temporarily halted army units. The primary weapon for this type of attack was massive quantities of explosives (usually homemade satchel charges or blocks of TNT). FMLN squads shadowing army units on the move were very careful to observe the security measures taken by those units. The victims of this type of attack were usually those units that habitually tended to concentrate their forces when they slept, or who had become careless with other security measures. The coup de main was only carried out by strategic mobile forces units, as they were the forces that trained in this tactic and had the technical expertise.

The guerrilla force carrying out this type of attack divided itself into three separate task groups, the first of which was the assault group. This

group had the mission of annihilating and destroying the objective and was assigned enough equipment, ammunition, and explosives to maintain sustained fire for three to five minutes maximum. The success of the attack depended on surprise, speed, and the massive application of force in the first few seconds of the attack to gain overwhelming superiority of fire.

The second group was the support group. This group supported the assault group by laying down concentrated fire on enemy elements that might threaten the success of the assault group. Generally, this group was larger than the assault group as it had to pin down the objective's security element and clear a path for the assault group through heavy fire, and, if things did not go as planned, provide sufficient firepower for the assault group to withdraw. The weapons usually assigned to the support group were 90mm recoilless rifles, RPG-7 and RPG-2 rocket launchers, M-60 machine guns, M-79 grenade launchers, and rifle grenades.

The final element was the security group. The security group had multiple missions such as to secure the route of withdrawal, protect the command post, temporarily contain enemy reinforcements for the attacked objective, and so on. This group was usually located between 100 and 200 meters from the objective. It was the first element to reach the assigned location for the attack, and the last to withdraw, waiting until all other elements had escaped to begin its own withdrawal.

An army unit had to be constantly on guard, as this type of attack could take place at any time. However, the guerrillas preferred to attack army units in this manner at the end of an offensive, as the army unit was preparing to withdraw, and not when they had just started an offensive and were fresh on the battle zone. Government troops were usually in the field continuously for between fifteen and twenty-one days. During those fifteen days they had usually suffered several casualties from mines, booby traps, and snipers; consequently, the men might be a little demoralized. The soldiers would be tired from marching up and down through broken terrain, and from sleeping out in the open. They would have been hungry because they would have eaten insufficient quantities of canned rations, and finally, their minds would no longer be on the operation, but rather on returning to safer, friendly lines and going on leave for a few days. Except for the most highly trained, experienced, and disciplined units, some lapse of security was sure to occur. This was when the guerrillas were bound to strike. The FMLN always had small forces, militias, and others that would shadow the armed forces units. These small detachments would shadow a unit throughout the entire offensive and then report the most opportune time for an attack. Unless that unit was very careful, it could suffer heavy casualties from this type of devastating assault.

THE BUR BUR TRAP

In February 1983 at Bur Bur Hill, San Simon Morazan, the Bellosa Battalion was conducting offensive operations. The headquarters was set up at Osicala. The 1st company had a new commander, Lieutenant Larios Burgos. Larios Burgos was a good officer, but was a bit green. He had only commanded a platoon in combat for a few weeks prior to being made company commander, and had a tendency to get too excited when the shooting started. His company was assigned to conduct a combat patrol of the San Simon canton to confirm reports of the suspected movement of very large FMLN forces. Attached to the 1st company were two twelve-man patrols of the battalion recondos. These two patrols were out ahead of the main body of the company, on point. The FMLN had detected the company and sent ahead a small cover and contact force to keep tabs on the movement of the army forces. The guerrillas, however, had not seen the recondo patrols and ran into them unexpectedly. The recondos reacted first and nine guerrillas were killed in a few seconds of combat. The recondos picked up six FN FAL rifles. The remainder of the FMLN contact unit began to flee, with the recondos in hot pursuit. The recondos reported their actions to Larios Burgos, who got caught up in the recondos excitement and ordered his company to accelerate its march to close the gap between the company and the recondos. Larios Burgos thought that he had the guerrillas on the run, and felt that speed was more important than caution. The guerrillas fled up a box canyon. On the right was a large, long hill known as Bur Bur, on the left was another hill of slightly less elevation, and at the end of the canyon was a little pimple with narrow passes to either side. Larios Burgos did not detach platoons to cover his flanks and take the heights on either side. When the recondos, the command group, and the lead platoon were in the valley, heavy-weapons fire erupted from the heights on both sides of the valley. This fire pinned down the Bellosa elements in the valley. This was at about 1030. While the heavy fire from either side of the valley pinned down those troops within the trap, a strong force of guerrillas came off the south of Bur Bur Hill. Hurling satchel charges and firing automatic weapons, they charged across the valley floor in the direction of the opposite hill. In a rapid, violent action this force annihilated all army forces in its path and quickly reached the other side of the box valley. The attack sealed off the valley mouth and shut close to 75 soldiers in the guerrilla trap. Part of the assaulting guerrilla force now laid down fire on the trapped men from the rear, adding a third direction from which they were now receiving fire. The rest wheeled to face the opposite direction and set up a strong position to keep the rest of the company from coming to the rescue of their comrades. The company elements outside the valley made repeated attempts to break through, but could not penetrate the

strong FMLN position. This force called for reinforcements. The 4th company was assigned the task of breaking through. However, the only way to get there was by foot, and that would take many hours, time that would prove too long for the men in the trap. Receiving fire from three sides, the Bellosos stood their ground and fought back. Their resistance was far greater than the guerrillas had expected, and delayed the final guerrilla assault for several hours. However, it could not be prolonged indefinitely, since there was little cover and the guerrillas were on three sides. It was practically like shooting fish in a barrel. Throughout the day, the guerrillas hurled explosives down on the hapless men. By nightfall every man in the valley was either wounded or dead. Larios Burgos was hit in his femur, and could no longer move. At nightfall, he ordered his men to attempt to break out. Those wounded that could not move would cover their escape. The only direction from which the soldiers were not receiving fire was from the north, so those that could move went that way. About half the men made it out, but every single one of them was wounded in some way. All the men left behind were killed, a total of 36. Early the next morning, after those that could had escaped, the guerrillas assaulted the kill zone and threw explosive charges at anyone who offered resistance. Many of the bodies were blown apart. The guerrillas then searched for the soldiers that remained alive. Those who attempted to remain undetected were shot. This was apparently the fate of the company commander; he was probably found unconscious from the loss of blood and then executed in cold blood. Larios Burgos was found with a bullet, fired at point-blank range, in his forehead. When the 4th company arrived, it was to police up the dead. Bur Bur Hill had cost the Bellosos dearly.

The Night Maneuver

One of the ways of avoiding this type of an assault was to avoid being located. Since the army troops knew that squads of militias and masses trailed them during operations and reported their position, strength, and disposition to the higher echelons, the armed forces developed a ruse to fool these elements. It was common practice for an army unit to set up camp near dusk. The army would purposefully, very visibly and loudly set up camp at a determined location. After dark, when the troops were sure that their tails had scurried off to report the situation to the guerrilla command structure, they would quietly break camp and shift their position several hundred meters to a preselected and presecured location. Here the army unit would set up its true overnight perimeter. The army units would often hear the guerrilla forces attack the recently vacated camp, and could often catch the assaulting guerrillas in a devastating flanking fire from their new perimeter. After attacking several empty po-

sitions like this, the FMLN developed a new tactic to counter the army's tactic of shifting locations. This tactic was known to the FMLN as the "night maneuver."

The unique characteristic of the night maneuver was that it incorporated three different categories of FMLN units: the mobile forces, the local guerrillas, and the clandestine militias, in an effort to seek out and destroy the targeted army unit. As it was conducted at night, the FMLN needed some means to avoid blue-on-blue clashes (clashes between one's own forces in the dark). To avoid this, the FMLN separated lanes of attack by referencing prominent terrain features.

After some experience, the FMLN noticed that most army units had the habit of shifting their night location a distance of no more than 500 meters. So, rather than attacking a specified point, the FMLN tacticians realized that they could still strike an army unit if they launched multiple assaults against a predetermined, bracketed area from the original location where the masses and militia tails last saw the unit set up its false camp. The three types of forces would line up next to each other and attack the bracketed zone in three parallel directions. One would attack one end of the bracketed area, one the middle, and one the other end. The distribution of mobile forces, local guerrillas, and militia forces would be determined by where the FMLN thought it was most likely that the army unit had relocated. The first unit to run into the army force would act as a holding force, while the other two forces would maneuver to strike the enemy unit in the flanks. While the night maneuver could be very successful and devastating, there were a number of drawbacks. The length of this type of operation could not be longer than 48 hours due to the high attrition rate of ammunition and rations. Communication between the different forces was always problematic. Considerable time was needed to concentrate the forces, and sometimes the army unit would have left before the forces could be mobilized. Finally, it was very difficult to determine which units would carry such key weapons as RPG-7s, RPG-2s, M-60 machine guns, and so forth, for the greatest effect on the enemy. While the FMLN might know what type of weapons and the number of troops the army unit had, it never knew how these weapons were positioned, or the exact lay of the land where the army unit was located. The FMLN was literally taking a stab in the dark. The FMLN first used this tactic in northern Morazan, at the end of 1986 at El Mozote and El Bramadero. The night maneuver was subsequently adopted by the rest of the guerrilla fronts. The FMLN high command sent out an official directive on this tactic and circulated it to all of the fronts. It was continually successful, because some of the army units were not disciplined in their communications, in their intelligence counter-measures, and their night movements.

Night Maneuver against Commandos Orientales in Morazan, 1987

In October or November of 1987, the guerrillas had forces crossing the Torola River to attack the army positions on the hill at Osicala, Caacopera, and Altos del Aguacate. The guerrillas were coming down across the Torola River and randomly striking each place with heavy assaults with the purpose of inflicting constant numbers of heavy casualties. They would strike one place, retreat across the Torola River, wait a couple of days, strike another, wait a couple of days, strike the same place, and so on. From aerial reconnaissance the army knew that the guerrillas were coming from the El Mozote, the village of Joateca, and Volcancillo Hill. The guerrillas were picking up their logistics at these points and coming down the trails that connected these three areas to the different points for concentration to attack. The army decided to upset their plan by striking deep into their rear and setting up ambushes along the trails the guerrillas were using. The Eastern Commandos were assigned the mission and chose three locations from which to operate. Four twenty-man teams were sent in. Based on aerial reconnaissance, ground recon observations, and information from an informant, the commandos began to set up ambushes. Ambushes were set up at night to avoid detection, but one of the teams setting up an ambush along the trail near Volcancillo ran into a squad of local guerrillas conducting their regular area patrols. There was a short, confusing firefight, after which both sides withdrew. The team at Volcancillo called the group commander on the radio and informed him of the situation and asked for further instructions. The group commander told the two strike groups in this area to immediately march eight kilometers to the southwest and rendezvous with the remainder of the unit. Without any support, the commander knew that several isolated groups of twenty men would be sliced up by the guerrilla forces. They had a better chance together than apart. It took the group at Volcancillo two days to cross the eight kilometers. This was because the terrain in Morazan was so rugged, and they had to take extreme security precautions to avoid the guerrilla patrols that were churning up the area looking for them.

On the second day, the entire 80-man group and the commander rendezvoused near Cerro Pando Hill. At 1900 hours they purposefully allowed the guerrillas to see them setting up a camp on this hill, and even lit a few fires. As soon as it was dark, the entire group marched two kilometers to the west, and set up a true perimeter at Villa El Rosario. Here they remained alert, as they had no idea whether the guerrillas had fallen for their trick. Within seven hours of the time they had set up their false camp, the guerrillas mounted an attack. Thinking that the force on Cerro Pando Hill was a regular force because of the still-burning fires,

the guerrillas only sent forces directly toward the camp and 500 meters to either side. The two forces on either end came up empty, and began to converge on the middle. All three forces struck simultaneously. At 0200 the next morning, the commandos two kilometers away began to hear large forces converging on the area they had evacuated; 90mm recoilless rifles boomed, and 81mm mortar rounds were heard thumping the areas where the fires were still burning. A tremendous amount of rifle fire and the explosion of hand grenades were heard. Realizing this was a big attack with a large force, the commando group commander called up an AC-47 gunship, which began to orbit the area. Flares floated down over the battlefield and the planes' machine guns opened heavy, concentrated fire on the guerrillas below.

Night Maneuver at Chalatenango

In March of 1990, the Belloso Battalion was coming off a 30-day operation from around the Volcancillo-La Laguna area of Chalatenango. They were bounding back by company. In other words, one company would move while the other companies set up security to cover its movement. One company was moving particularly slowly for an unknown reason. To make matters worse, the company ran into a minefield, so the movement of this company slowed to a snail's pace. As a consequence, the other companies of the battalion got far ahead of this company. Movement was so slow that the battalion was forced to spend another night in the combat zone. The company was exhausted and somewhat demoralized because of its slow movement and the mines it had run into. When the soldiers shifted their position for the night, they were too exhausted to shift very far. In addition, there was a real fear of running into more minefields. That night, the FMLN launched a night maneuver against them. The company was hit from three sides with heavy fire from small arms, machine guns, grenades, and rocket launchers. The commander immediately called for support, and an AC-47 was scrambled. It was soon orbiting overhead and began to drop flares to light up the battlefield. On the direction of the company commander, the gunship layed down heavy fire with its multiple .50 caliber guns. The AC-47 temporarily stopped the FMLN from advancing. However, they were still pouring in heavy fire on the Belloso company perimeter. A UH1-M gunship joined the AC-47 and began to make rocket and strafing runs on the guerrilla positions. The company also called for artillery fire. The Military District 1 battery on Sierpe hill at Chalatenango city began to lay down fire. The combination of AC-47, UH1-M, and 105mm artillery fire kept the guerrillas from overrunning the position, and by

daylight they had faded away. The Belloso company's casualties were seven killed and twelve wounded.

The Annihilation Ambush

The ambush has been a favorite guerrilla tactic since time immemorial. It has always been one of the mainstays of irregular warfare, as it allows a small force to take on a much larger force while economizing resources and personnel. In the twentieth century, one of the main benefits of a well-planned ambush has been the recovery of weapons, ammunition, and equipment far in excess of the ammunition and blood invested in the endeavor by the attacking force. The FMLN, like all guerrilla forces, employed the ambush as a favorite means of combat. Over twelve years of combat, the FMLN went from employing simple line and L-shaped ambushes to far more sophisticated types. Some of the most regularly employed methods will be described below.

In the years when the FMLN was openly confronting the armed forces with large units, the FMLN often employed what it called the annihilation ambush. This was an ambush set up by a large force to surprise, fix, and then overrun a government unit. The objective was to annihilate the targeted force as it moved along a road as well as to capture all of the weapons possible and destroy those items that could not be carried away. Ambushes of this type were essentially linear but could be modified according to the terrain or the lay of the road. The kill zone was in the middle of the line and could be anywhere from a few meters to several hundred meters long. In 1983, for example, the FMLN tried to annihilate the Belloso Battalion with an ambush that was over a kilometer in length. Along the kill zone would be placed numbers of directional mines to cripple vehicles and kill dismounted personnel. Behind the mines would be an ambush group provided with automatic weapons, with the mission of inflicting as much damage on the enemy as possible. On either end of the ambush were two maneuver groups. These groups had two missions. The first mission was to protect either flank of the kill zone, permitting no reinforcements into the kill zone after the ambush had been initiated, and allowing none of the victims out. The second mission was to assault through the objective once the ambush group had inflicted all the damage possible from its mines and automatic weapons. The assault groups would kill or capture all surviving enemy personnel and police up all weapons, equipment, ammunition, or any other useful item that could be found. Anything that could not be taken was destroyed or sabotaged. Several ambushes of this type were carried out between 1982 and 1984, particularly in eastern El Salvador, and unwary units suffered heavily.

**Example: Operation Carried Out on the Highway between Ilobasco
and Sensuntepeque, February 17, 1985**

Information and observation indicated that the enemy from Sensuntepeque made one or two runs every day by vehicle with between 25 and 30 soldiers. The terrain picked for the kill zone was broken with a highway running from the east to west. The point selected for the ambush was on the south side of the road, and consisted of several hilltops interspersed by a ravine, a road, and a few civilian houses of Las Vainillas. On the north side of the road there were also some hills, a stream, a cluster of houses of the town and, more to the northwest, the Santa Lucia Hacienda. There was little concealment, only some short bushes.

Two columns and a support platoon were assigned to the ambush. A scout platoon also participated under Lieutenant Miguel. The total number of personnel was as follows:

Column 1	81 guerrillas
Column 2	67 guerrillas
Support	17 guerrillas
Scouts	22 guerrillas
Security	44 guerrillas
Support	14 guerrillas
Total	245 guerrillas

There was one rifle for every comrade, as well as the corresponding ammunition. In addition, there were seven M-60 machine guns, one 60mm mortar, one .50 caliber machine gun, two RPG-2s, one RPG-7, and two 90mm recoilless rifles.

The 1st column under Lieutenant Carlos was to carry out the ambush with the 2nd platoon directly behind the kill zone with three mines and an RPG-7. The ambush was to be initiated by the RPG-7 when and if the enemy appeared. The rest of the 2nd platoon would then assault across the kill zone. The 1st platoon was to maneuver on the west end of the kill zone to close off the escape route to Santa Lucia, with one squad advancing up the highway and another squad that would cross the road and link up in the north with a platoon from the 2nd column to close off the escape route that way. The third squad would act as a stop group in the same zone. The 3rd platoon was to carry out the same mission as the 1st platoon on the east side of the 2nd platoon.

Column 2's (with two platoons) mission was to stay in column formation and, once the main action had occurred, the 1st platoon was to cross the highway and help the squad of the 1st platoon 1st column. The 2nd platoon was to cross the east side of the ambush zone 80 meters from the ambush zone and move in toward the kill zone.

The support squad of Column 2 was to take the heights five meters to the south of the highway where it intersected with the road.

The scout platoon was to act as a stop group on the east side toward San Isidro, Sensuntepeque. They were to set up on a rise south of the highway 300 meters from the ambush zone. A squad from the heavy weapons platoon would go with them with the 60mm mortar.

The command post would be located 200 meters south of the ambush zone. A security element would be posted 100 meters further south.

The heavy weapons platoon was to support the mission by shooting up the vehicle with the .50 caliber machine gun and rifle fire from an elevation that was to the southwest of the kill zone. Afterward, they were to move one thousand meters to the south to set up anti-air defense and withdraw after the action ended.

The truck was sighted coming down the road, and the 2nd platoon, 1st column braced themselves for the attack. When the truck came into the kill zone at 1030 hours, the RPG-7 operator stood up, took aim, and fired. The aim was a little off, as the truck was only lightly damaged and did not stop. The mines were set off, but because the truck was still moving, they were not very effective, did not kill any personnel inside the vehicle, but did blow out some of the tires. This forced the truck to finally stop, but twenty meters beyond the edge of the kill zone. This meant that firing lanes had to be improvised and that all of the enemy soldiers were alive. They did not give up, but immediately dismounted and attempted to fight their way out. Here, the .50 caliber machine gun and the 60mm mortar proved to be worth all the trouble the guerrillas had gone through to haul them up the hill and set them up. While the machine gun and the mortar pinned the enemy down, the 1st and 2nd platoons began to maneuver to contain the soldiers within the ambush. The enemy was determined to break out, and despite heavy casualties, fought fiercely against the 1st platoon. As a squad from the 1st platoon crossed the road, the enemy concentrated all its fire in that direction; three guerrillas were killed and the guerrilla squad was effectively put out of action. A guerrilla from the 2nd column was also killed in this area. This opened a temporary hole in the ambush through which several of the soldiers escaped. This hole was soon replugged, and after 45 minutes of fierce fighting, the enemy was silent. Nineteen soldiers managed to escape, seventeen soldiers were killed, and two were captured along with nineteen weapons. Among the captured items were two PRC-77 radios and some operations orders for the Tejute-Cabañas area. The guerrillas suffered four killed, three from Column 1 and one from Column 2. The withdrawal was carried out with no delays or setbacks.⁵

Setup Ambush

Ambushes usually involve long periods of waiting, and most of them turn up empty-handed. This is a very frustrating aspect of the ambush. The FMLN guerrillas devised a method that would usually guarantee a relatively short waiting period. This was called the setup ambush because the guerrillas set the army up to fall into the trap. The method was to conduct some type of guerrilla activity that the army could not ignore. The guerrillas would carry out this activity at a place where there were routes that the armed forces would be forced to use to respond to the activity. The most common activity carried out by the FMLN would be to set up a roadblock on a major route of transportation. Here they would

stop traffic, charge war taxes, and burn vehicles. An ambush was usually set up on a route near the army installation that was closest to the roadblock. When the armed forces vehicles or troops passed by in reaction to the roadblock, the guerrillas would spring the ambush.

The Prolonged Harassment Ambush

A similar type of ambush was the prolonged harassment ambush. The target of this ambush was to attack and destroy reinforcements on the road. The technique was to lay siege to a military installation. The objective was not to overrun the installation, but rather to cut it off from other forces and to conduct continual harassment attacks against it. Harassment consisted of sniper attacks, incursions against the outer defenses, the continual launching of ramps, tubeless artillery or rifle grenades, and so on. The objective was to harass the installation enough that it would force the army to send motorized reinforcements. Meanwhile, strong ambushes would be set up along all the routes of approach to annihilate or inflict heavy casualties on these reinforcements. The FMLN felt that troops moving in vehicles along the road were much more vulnerable than troops in fortified installations.

The Dislodgement Assault Combined with Ambush

The FMLN also learned to combine ambushes with assaults. This tactic could be carried out against units in defensive positions, or units that had set up a perimeter for the night. The FMLN would carefully study the terrain around the army position and then covertly set up annihilation ambushes along all the possible routes of withdrawal, except on one side. Usually, these ambushes were set up to cover ravines, gullies, trails, roads, rivers and stream beds, and any other likely avenue of escape. On the side that was left open, the strategic mobile forces would launch a sudden, violent, and simultaneous assault, intentionally leaving the other sides of the perimeter untouched. Often the assault would be accompanied by the concentrated fire of mortars and/or popular artillery. All the guerrilla firepower and force was concentrated at one point in the perimeter. The intent was that the army troops in the defensive position would withdraw through the sides of the perimeter that had been left open and be channeled along specific routes. These forces in flight would blunder into the ambushes and become easy victims for the guerrilla forces posted along these routes. A high body count could result, and large numbers of weapons could be captured in this manner, at a minimal price to the guerrillas. Secondary objectives were to deliver a blow to the unit morale and to unravel unit integrity. The guerrillas often employed this type of operation against army units that remained for long periods of time in

the FMLN strategic rear guard and became the object of permanent observation and follow up.

NOTES

1. FPL, *Del Jefe y 2o. Jefe del E.M.F. José Roberto Sibrián A La Comandancia General*, El Salvador, January 28, 1981. Report from the Zacatecoluca area on the guerrilla actions of the 1981 Final Offensive. Document captured from guerrillas at an unknown date.

2. FPL, *Revista Farabundo Martí: El Pueblo Salvadoreño en su Lucha* No. 8 (Managua, Nicaragua, 1981): 4–5.

3. David Spencer, *FMLN FES: Fight Much With Little* (Provo, Utah: unpublished manuscript, 1990).

4. Account based on the interview with a Salvadoran officer who was in the relief force that landed in response to the attack on El Mono Hill.

5. FPL, *Principales Experiencias Operativas de la D.A. #2 del Año 1985* (San Vicente, El Salvador: Ediciones Chinchontepec Heróico, 1986).

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Urban Combat Tactics

The FMLN began its war and tried to end the war through urban insurrection. Urban insurrection was seen as the way to decisively end the war by taking it into the heart of the enemy stronghold. To the FMLN, the strategic rear guard of the army was the cities. If the rear guard was taken from the enemy, there would be no place to which it could withdraw, and it would be forced to fight to the death, or surrender.

The FMLN conducted two major urban offensives, the first beginning on January 10, 1981 and the second on November 11, 1989. Both offensives failed, but between the first and the second the FMLN learned a lot of lessons and spent a lot of time analyzing the lessons learned, and made vast qualitative improvements in its tactics. Because of this, the experience of the first did not in the least resemble that of the second.

The strategic concept of the urban offensive was the same for both offensives. Guerrilla military action in the cities would provide the catalyst for a popular uprising. Popular rebellion would isolate and immobilize the troops in their barracks. Effectively under siege, they would eventually run out of ammunition or the will to continue fighting and collapse. However, while the general strategic aims were the same, the tactical assumptions behind the techniques used in each were very different.

In 1980, the FMLN was an inexperienced organization and had to rely on foreign experience for its tactical guidelines. The most recent example was the urban uprising of Managua a year earlier by the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas held that the uprising in Managua, and earlier in the city of Masaya, had been the key events that had toppled the Somoza government. Until these uprisings, the Somoza National Guard had kept the Sandinistas bottled up along the southern border with Costa Rica, and

in isolated pockets to the north of Managua, with little effort. The Sandinistas had expected a prolonged campaign and were surprised by how quickly the Somoza government collapsed when the situation became untenable in Managua. They passed this information on to the FMLN, and urged it to follow this model to force a quick end to the war.

The major concern in any insurrection is whether or not the population will rise in support of the guerrillas. Without the active support of the people, a guerrilla force cannot overcome an army. The different groups within the FMLN had invested much time building political front groups, and in 1979 and early 1980 most of its cadres were in these organizations, not in the guerrilla combat units. The FMLN faced a dilemma. If it wanted to rapidly build its proposed fifteen thousand-man army, the surest sources of available cadres were the key members of the political front organizations. However, if the political organizations were stripped of their key cadres, there was no guarantee that the organizations would come out into the streets for the insurrection. During the Sandinista revolution, the population of Managua had begun the insurrection spontaneously, with little active presence or guidance from the Sandinistas. The Nicaraguan guerrillas had been forced to rush as many guerrillas as possible to Managua to take advantage of the situation. They assured the FMLN that the same would happen in El Salvador. Based on the experience of the Sandinistas, the FMLN stripped its mass political organizations of their cadres, took these men into the mountains, and formed guerrilla combat units.¹

The 1981 offensive plan was based on three elements. The first was concerted military action. Each of the five organizations was assigned combat missions that it would carry out simultaneously with those operations carried out by other organizations. Each organization would be responsible for conducting its own operations, separate and distinct from the other organizations. In other words, except for the initial assignment of targets by the DRU, there would be little coordination between the different organizations in the same area of operations. This was due to continued bitter feelings between the factions. The only communication between the commanders of the various operations would be by word of mouth and the news. It was not expected that all of the operations would succeed, but it was expected that enough would succeed to liberate some territory and be able to freely support a massive infusion of weapons and personnel waiting in Nicaragua.

The second was spontaneous and simultaneous insurrection by the population. While some stimulus would be provided, the guerrillas calculated that there would be a massive response to the guerrilla attacks, and people would come out into the street en masse.

Third, the FMLN had a number of sympathizers within the armed forces and, it suspected, the sympathies of many more. An integral part of the

plan was that the army would split and a good number would cross over to join the guerrilla uprising.

The tactics developed corresponded with these objectives. The main target of the guerrilla forces would be the military barracks and installations. Units were to move in as close as possible without being detected, surround the installations, and attempt to keep the garrison bottled up and under siege for as long as possible. If they could, they were to take the installation. Essentially, these were incursion tactics on a grand scale. One of the elements lacking in the guerrilla arsenal was adequate artillery to take the army installations. Because of the problems in getting an adequate number of small arms into the country for the guerrilla units, the procurement of mortars and other artillery was not even considered. They took up too much space in shipments that could be occupied by small arms and ammunition. To compensate, the FMLN made several homemade mortars and developed what it called "tubeless artillery." Tubeless artillery were essentially miniature medieval catapults that, instead of slinging heavy rocks, tossed an explosive charge with either an impact device or a piece of time fuse that was lit before flinging.² This was the FMLN's secret weapon for taking army installations.

The remainder of the town was to be ignored, except to establish look-outs and small ambush parties along the likely routes of approach for any relieving force. Behind the guerrilla units, militia units would go in and call the people to insurrection. The militia units and the people that responded were expected to build barricades and inflict casualties on the army through the use of popular weaponry such as molotov cocktails and contact bombs. Once the army installations were surrounded and isolated, they could either be cowered into submission or bombed with tubeless artillery until they were destroyed. The following guerrilla account provides an excellent example of the fighting that took place during the 1981 urban offensive.

The Attack on Zacatecoluca, January 10, 1981

The two columns assigned to attack the town were supposed to make their approach by vehicle along the San Vicente-Zacatecoluca highway. One group would approach from the northeast, while the other would approach the town from the southeast. However, at the time that the groups set up their roadblocks, the southeastern group had to approach by foot and through wooded hills because not enough vehicles came by to be confiscated. The other group was able to get enough vehicles and make its planned approach. The delay of the group from the southwest caused the attacks to begin at different times because those that came by foot were not able to reach their starting positions at the planned time.

The enemy was alert and the guerrillas coming from the northeast were detected as soon as they reached the town. They had to immediately dismount from their vehicles and begin fighting without being in position. The fighting

started two blocks from the National Police building at 1730 hours against troops of the National Police, National Guard, and army soldiers. Around 200 comrades of the militias and masses followed the guerrillas in, agitated and called on the population to join the general insurrection. However, the people didn't open the doors of their houses because the firing was too intense.

The group on foot had problems when they arrived at the edge of town because the enemy was expecting them. They were forced to maneuver to be able to penetrate the town, and it wasn't until 2100 hours that they reached their positions surrounding the barracks and began their attack. The comrades were able to take one of the planned positions that dominated the army barracks on the south side of the installation. Here they set up the tubeless artillery.³ As soon as they reached this position they set up the catapult. Three explosive charges were flung but of the three, only one, which landed in the center of the barracks, exploded. The explosion shook the whole installation and its surroundings. The comrades knew they had done some damage because they heard moaning and yells from inside the fort. The soldiers' reaction was to begin wild firing with a mortar, which only damaged civilian property and did not cause any guerrilla casualties. However, just before the tubeless artillery was used, an armored vehicle charged out of the north gate of the installation. It opened fire with a top-mounted machine gun and with infantry weapons from within the vehicle, forcing all of the comrades on that side to disperse. Some comrades were killed in the withdrawal. The armored vehicle did not stop but continued toward the battle around the National Police building. The commander of the comrades surrounding the main barracks, Comrade Mauricio, ordered the comrade with the RPG-2 anti-tank rocket launcher, who was guarding the barracks' south gate, to hunt down this vehicle and destroy it.

After the guerrillas had succeeded with the first charge from the tubeless artillery, they prepared to fire four more charges, with which they thought they could destroy enough of the barracks to take the installation. At that moment another armored vehicle came out of the south portal. Because the RPG operator had been sent after the first vehicle, there was nothing to stop this second vehicle. The vehicle layed down concentrated automatic fire sweeping all of the area, forcing the comrades to abandon the tubeless artillery piece and the dominant positions that had been taken. These positions had allowed the guerrillas to hold the enemy bottled up inside the fort. The armored onslaught swept all of the area and the fight became disorganized and unfavorable for the comrades, as their forces became dispersed. The fighting degenerated into dispersed firefights all over town and there was no coordination. The northeast group was in the eastern part of town, under Comrade Juan, and the other group was in the southern part of town, both acting separately without any coordination. At 0300 hours on January 11, 1981, the fighting continued fiercely and the first armored vehicle that had come out the north gate of the main barracks was finally knocked out. The comrade with the RPG-2 hit it with two rockets. The vehicle was totally destroyed and all the crew killed. The comrades assaulted the armored vehicle and captured a little more than 600 rifle rounds, eight G-3 anti-personnel rifle grenades, some belts and other equipment, but no G-3 rifles, which had been totally destroyed in the resulting explosion. The comrades did not even pick up the pieces. At 0500 hours both Juan and Mauricio decided to withdraw. Juan thought

that he was still fighting alone and that Mauricio hadn't started fighting. Juan and his people withdrew to Piedra Grande, a place that is one hour away by foot. Mauricio's group withdrew through the gorge on the eastern side of the town through the train station. Both comrades reorganized their forces, which were much reduced because many were missing or killed.

At 0700 hours, comrades that had been left behind in the town were still fighting. Mauricio, believing that it was Juan with his people still fighting, immediately decided to go back and attack, which he did with two platoons. From the outset, the fighting was more intense than that of the night before. It raged through all of the town. At 1200 hours the other armored vehicle was destroyed in front of the bus terminal. It was also struck by two rockets. Around 500 cartridges were captured, and four G-3 anti-personnel grenades. The rifles were again totally destroyed. At 1300 hours three trucks of army reinforcements arrived from Usulután. The reinforcements allowed the enemy to encircle the comrades and several guerrillas were killed. The encirclement was broken around 1600 hours when the comrades withdrew along the train line of Zacate.

Meanwhile, Juan spent the day reorganizing his men and trying to find Mauricio to organize a joint attack with both forces. However, it was impossible to find him and it wasn't until 1700 hours that the overall area commander was able to locate both of them. A meeting was held in the Zacate cemetery to analyze the situation. The three commanders came to the conclusion that the best decision was to withdraw to reorganize the troops and make a new plan. Losses had been heavy and there were many leaderless troops. The withdrawal was carried out the night of January 11, 1981, in an orderly manner. A single platoon was sent to conduct a harassing attack while the withdrawal took place, and the comrades were reorganized. There were eight killed and ten wounded. Five weapons were lost, including the RPG-2. The comrade who carried this weapon was listed as missing.⁴

From this example we can see that the guerrilla attack did not succeed for several reasons. First, the armed forces were alert and waiting for the guerrilla forces, they offered much more resistance than expected. For example, just when the guerrillas thought they were close to the point of taking the main barracks, the garrison launched a counter-attack with armored vehicles. Second, the guerrilla attacks were not very well coordinated, and once things began to break down, communication was not maintained to coordinate efforts. The militias and masses were not very successful in provoking people to insurrection, or in creating enough obstacles and barricades to prevent strong reinforcements from arriving at a critical time. Finally, once the plan had gone astray, the guerrillas did not have established procedures to be able to quickly reorganize, recommunicate, and resume their attack. They were forced to withdraw without really accomplishing their objectives.

Weapons that played a critical role in the fighting were the tubeless artillery, the armored vehicles, and the RPG-2s. While many military thinkers downplay the role of homemade weapons, throughout the war the FMLN developed very ingenious designs that made a difference in

combat. In this case, tubeless artillery was on the verge of blasting a barracks into submission. The armed forces armor surprised the guerrillas and played a key role in frustrating their attempts to take army installations. The Salvadoran army tried to import armored vehicles but was restricted by an arms embargo. The army secretly built armored trucks and tracked vehicles that, in the case of Zacatecoluca, played a critical role in the battle. The FMLN continually underestimated the Salvadoran armed forces' will to resist, their resilience, and their battle cunning. This would be a guerrilla shortcoming throughout the war. They paid for it in 1981 with the failure of their offensive. The FMLN relied too much on factors out of its control, such as the willingness of the population to rebel and the number of armed forces personnel that were willing to give up or defect. The FMLN thought that if it only surrounded the main barracks the people would rebel on their own, and the army would give up with little or no fight. Little thought was given to proper urban tactics or house-to-house fighting. Guerrilla tactics for fighting in the hills and jungles were transposed to the urban environment. Nearly all of the fighting took place out in the open, in the streets, with the houses serving only to block fields of fire and streets serving as fire lanes. The only type of fortifications used by the guerrillas were generally barricades across streets made of anything that was handy.

THE 1989 URBAN OFFENSIVE "UNTIL THE LIMIT"

Preparations for the 1989 offensive began as early as 1985. The urban offensive was to be the cumulative act of the guerrilla strategy known as the Strategic Counter-Offensive. The concepts of a renewed general urban offensive began much earlier, probably soon after the failed 1981 attempt. The FMLN had much time to develop and analyze its earlier actions. The most glaring failure had been the lack of active popular support and popular rebellion during the previous offensive. The streets were completely abandoned, although many sympathizers did open their doors and provide food, water, and information to the guerrillas during 1981. However, these small actions did not constitute nor even approach rebellion, so the first task of the 1989 offensive was to provide a catalyst for popular rebellion. The FMLN decided this was its priority in terms of both the military and political action. The FMLN manual for urban combat stated:

In the concrete jungles, the active element of the population is the main force, as there will be no insurrection without active participation of the people. . . . Furthermore, the moral responsibility of the FMLN is to prepare the conditions for the decisive moment. This can be accomplished by providing education, and training to the masses so they can fight in self defense, and carry out the multitude of tasks that must be fulfilled.⁵

The FMLN identified three basic tasks that the guerrillas had to carry out. First, they must convert each neighborhood into a virtual fortress (see Figure 3). Second, they must provoke and agitate the masses to revolt and join the insurrection. Third, in every neighborhood they must build a workshop for the construction of homemade weapons. These workshops were known as TAPs (Taller de Armamento Popular).⁶

The concept of the offensive was still to isolate the armed forces from the people, and immobilize them. However, in 1981 this was accomplished by surrounding and attacking the army barracks and installations. This time the FMLN decided that it would not attack the barracks except to harass and distract the army from the main guerrilla forces. The main forces would go into the neighborhoods and fortify them, using the time bought through the harassment attacks. By creating a network of fortified neighborhoods around the army barracks, and by slowly expanding these networks inward, they would strangle the army into submission.

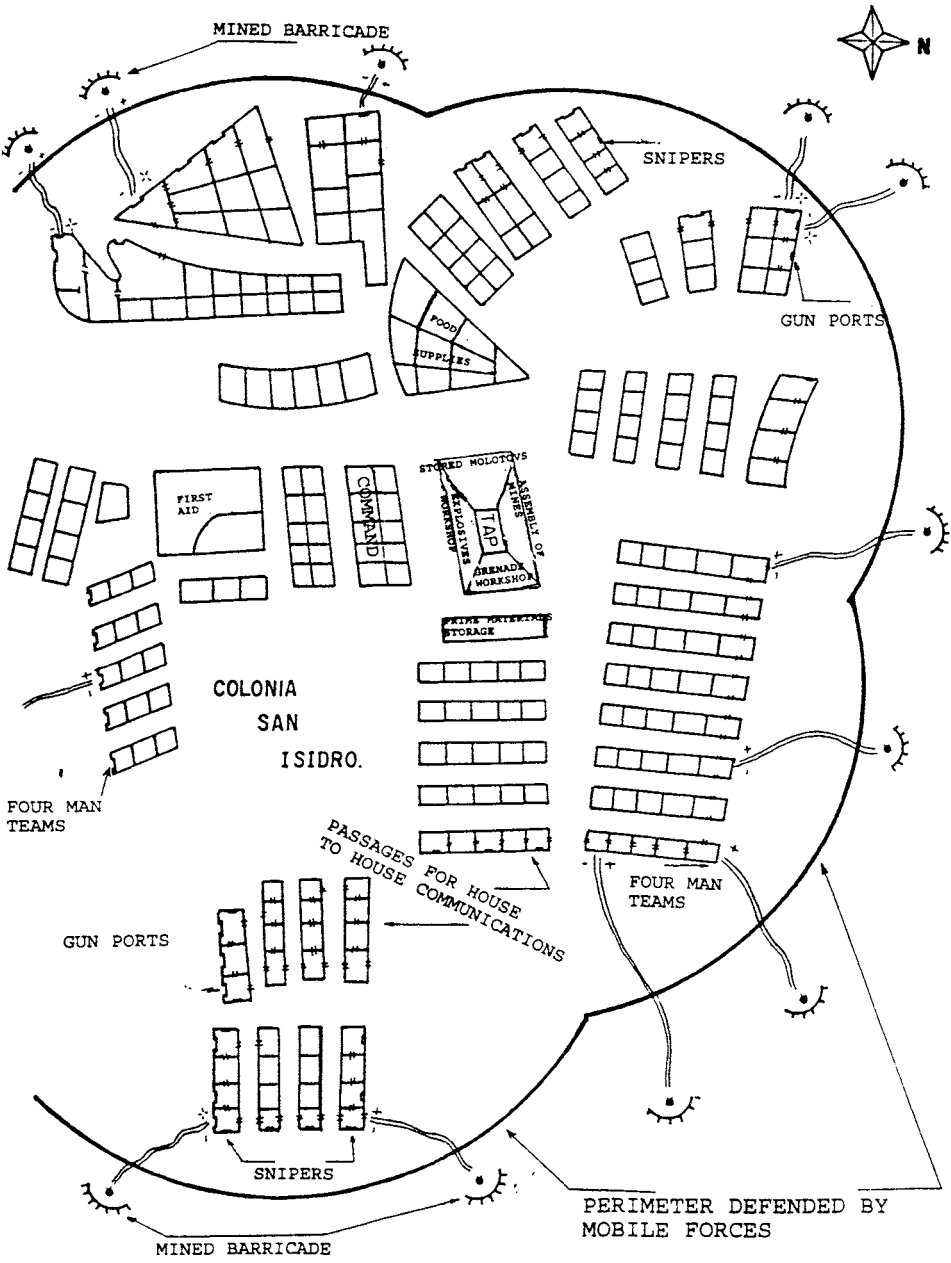
The guerrilla units were to go into a neighborhood, establish their base of operations in the center, and begin to construct their fortifications from this point outward, expanding in a circle.

The neighborhood command element was responsible for the internal organization of the neighborhood and coordinated with the territorial command. The neighborhood commander assigned his guerrillas blocks to defend and fortify, and sent out mobile teams to circle the territory and set up ambushes and barricades across the main access routes. Neighborhood commanders had a tremendous amount of responsibility since, to the FMLN, their competence spelled victory or defeat. In addition to leading his fighters, the neighborhood commander was supposed to organize the incorporation of the locals, set up TAPs, supply dumps, first aid posts, and training and indoctrination schools, supervise the construction of civilian shelters, and more. He had to maintain permanent communication by messenger or radio with his block commanders and the territory commanders to have a complete view of the development of events.

The block commanders had only to maintain control of their combat guerrillas and keep in touch with the neighborhood commander. The block commander would order the fortification of his block. Urban blocks would be defended by setting up combat positions in the corner houses facing the perimeter. Other houses would also be occupied that offered good fields of fire and observation to the defenders. Communications and movement between houses on the block was to be facilitated by knocking man-size holes in the walls to allow entrance from the side or back without coming under the direct observation or fire of the enemy. At the entrances to the block, two-meters-deep anti-tank ditches and barricades were built, and these were surrounded by command-detonated anti-tank and anti-personnel mines.

The FMLN anticipated that the best positions to cover the barricades would be located at the corner houses and the middle houses of a block.

Figure 3
FMLN Fortifications of a Typical Neighborhood, November 1989



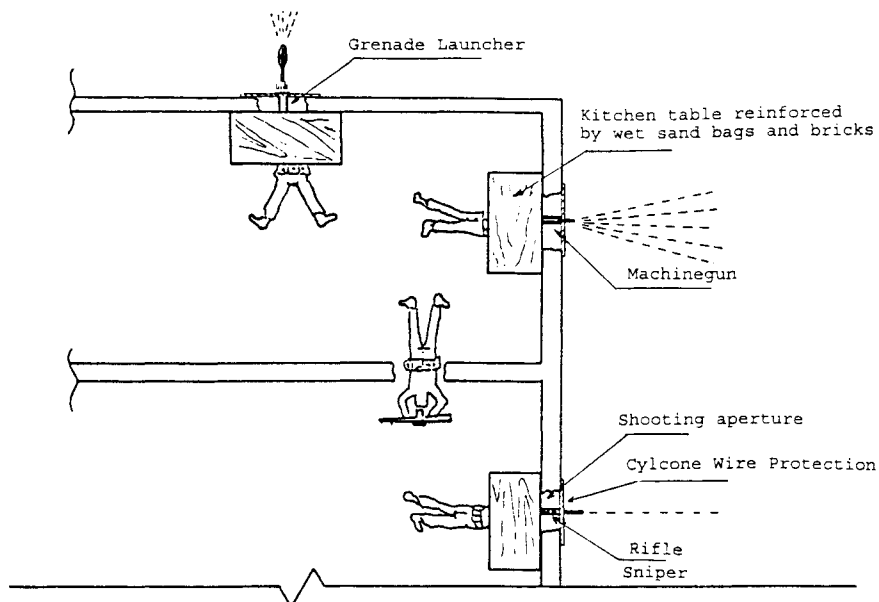
The corner house positions would be the strong points. Based on a detailed analysis of the surrounding terrain and conditions, a team of no less than four would occupy a corner house. All of the doors and windows were first shut. Any movement in and out of the houses would be through holes knocked in the walls connecting rooms and houses. Based on the analysis of the team, positions were constructed. These were not to be window level, but rather at floor level by knocking a hole in the outer wall so the guerrilla could fire onto the street and surrounding area. The sizes of the holes were only big enough to allow vision and the operation of the corresponding weapon. The ideal position gave the combatant a good field of vision in a standing, kneeling, or lying position. Care had to be taken to avoid too many positions along one wall, as the multiple holes would severely weaken the foundation of the wall. The guerrillas covered the outsides of the holes with metal frames covered with wire mesh (cyclone fencing or chicken wire). Windows were also covered in this manner. The mesh protected the loopholes and orifices from the penetration of rockets, grenades, and mortar rounds. Rockets would explode on the mesh, instead of inside the building, and mortar rounds and grenades would bounce off and explode away from the building. The outside mesh was usually covered with some type of camouflage.

Holes were dug into the floor immediately behind the individual orifices, and the rubble placed in sandbags and used to protect the position. If possible, overhead cover was provided by placing an ordinary kitchen table over the position, up against the wall, reinforcing the legs with sandbags, and placing additional sandbags and rubble on top. If possible, the sandbags were to be dampened to make them more difficult to penetrate, as well as to keep down the dust and smoke to prevent giving away the position (see Figure 4).

The FMLN organized its four-man corner positions with a machine gunner, a rocket- or grenade-launcher operator, a rifleman, and an ammunition bearer and observer. The ammunition bearer carried the team radio, or in the absence of this equipment was the runner between his position and the block commander.

The rocket-launcher operator was in charge of taking out any armored vehicles that approached. In addition to his rocket launcher, he could attack vehicles by setting off command-detonated mines to be laid 100 to 150 meters in front of his position, along likely avenues of approach. The mines were generally of two types, fan anti-personnel mines (claymores) or cumulative charge, anti-tank mines. Both were homemade. Anti-tank mines were placed in front of the anti-tank ditch. Fan mines were placed in the doorways of houses and in the trees or on the sides of walls, and were well camouflaged. They were to be used on unwary troops marching up the road or riding in the back of open-topped vehicles. In addition, the teams were encouraged to create a reserve of Molotov cocktails for use against armored vehicles in close, which would

Figure 4
Diagram of a Corner House Position



not usually destroy the vehicles, but the resulting fire would make things too hot for the crew, and they would be forced to abandon the vehicle. The FMLN also set up plastic bags containing homemade napalm (gasoline mixed with shoe glue, durapax, and soap flakes) and scattered these on the advanced barricades. The purpose was to finish off any armored vehicles immobilized at the barricades by mines. To light the napalm, the guerrillas would throw Molotovs at the barricade and attempt to set the bags on fire. In addition, cans of flammable paint, old car tires, and other flammables were strewn around the barricades. Set on fire, these created a visual as well as physical obstacle for approaching troops.

At the approach of an army force, the ammunition bearer would send a message by radio or go personally to the block commander and notify him of the enemy approach. In turn, the block commander would notify the neighborhood chief who, according to the information, would deploy his forces for defense. The FMLN did not envision a rigid defense, but rather one with many withdrawals and advances, depending on the conditions. In both retreat and advance, the machine gunner was the last man to move, covering his team with its most powerful weapon until it was in position. At each new position, they would attempt to fortify the new position with new barricades and so on.

The houses in the middle of the block were occupied by snipers and

sharpshooters operating in pairs. Their mission was to observe any attempted enemy advance. The fire of the snipers alerted the rest of the guerrillas to an army advance. Snipers built fortified positions on the roofs and other high places. In addition to alerting the rest of the guerrillas to ground attacks, the snipers had the mission of providing defense against air attack.

In addition to the block defense, the neighborhood commander established small but powerful mobile units that moved in a circular pattern around the assigned neighborhood. These groups were basically patrols with orders to attack targets of opportunity. They would ambush any vulnerable army units and set up obstacles and barricades as they saw fit. Additionally, the mobile groups could have the mission to cover vegetated or bare terrain, next to the neighborhood, as they were likely spots of army advance. Anti-tank and anti-personnel mines were set up, and in the open spaces (empty lots, soccer fields, etc.) stakes and wire were strung to impede helicopter landings. The FMLN ran a flexible battle plan and was not tied to any particular piece of terrain. It withdrew or advanced as the situation dictated. This tactic was called "The Lung," shrinking in or expanding out. This concept was continually emphasized in the manuals.⁷

AGITATION/PROPAGANDA/ORGANIZATION OF THE PEOPLE

All the military tactics described previously were considered useless by the FMLN if it could not get the people to join the insurrection. In the 1981 offensive, the FMLN had counted on the population to join spontaneously, as the Nicaraguan population had in the Masaya and Managua uprisings of 1979. However, the Salvadorans had not responded as the Nicaraguans had, and only very small, isolated groups ventured into the streets to support the offensive. In 1989, the FMLN did not count on the spontaneity of the Salvadoran people. Instead, it attempted to force the participation of the masses through structured and carefully organized programs. One of the main purposes behind occupying and fortifying the neighborhoods was to bring the war to the people, since the people would not voluntarily come to the war. The FMLN had found in its recruiting efforts that involuntary conscription, through the process of organization, training, and indoctrination, could produce reliable cadres. The FMLN decided that it could transpose this methodology onto entire urban neighborhoods. The FMLN sincerely believed that most of the people secretly, yet complacently, sympathized with the guerrillas. Fear and repression were the key elements preventing the people from openly supporting the FMLN. They believed that it would not take too

much compulsion to turn the people into active members of the revolution.⁸

FMLN guidelines called for urban commandos to lead the guerrilla columns into the neighborhoods and take the initiative in organizing the people for the struggle against the army. These urban commandos would form an agitation team directly responsible to the neighborhood commander. It was reasoned that the urban commandos would be more familiar with city culture, would often be from the neighborhood in question, and would be more likely to gain the trust of the locals.

The urban agitation teams used loudspeakers to congregate the people to a meeting, announce the beginning of the insurrection, and exhort them to organize. The guerrillas were warned that at first the population might be very reluctant to participate, but over time they would give in to the prodding and persuasion of the FMLN. The guerrillas were instructed not to get upset if, during the first day or two, the population acted panicky and uncooperative. The shock would wear off with time and, as it wore off, the people would get more and more involved in the assignments.

The first step taken by the agitation teams was to make a census of the neighborhood population and then make lists of doctors, nurses, drivers, collaborators, combatants, and technically skilled people (mechanics, electricians, plumbers, woodworkers, sheet metal workers, brick layers, chemists, etc.). Next, they made lists of tools, materials, and other useful items for the construction of shelters and barricades. These materials were then gathered and separated into categories.

The agitation groups then began the organization and selection of teams to collect water, food, and medicine, and establish distribution points from which these could be rationed. Then teams of civilians were to establish medical posts and construct bomb shelters (for the children, the elderly, and the infirm). So-called "Civil Defense Brigades" were formed to fight fires and to remove rubble and fallen electrical cables. These teams, supported by cadres, were also in charge of giving instruction on measures to be taken in the face of artillery fire and air attack. Measures included gathering flashlights and lanterns and preparing solutions of lemon, vinegar, and salt in which to soak handkerchiefs to cover the face to counter tear gas. When massive amounts of gas were used, they were instructed to burn newspaper, as the hot air would make the gases rise and nullify the effects.⁹

The FMLN relied heavily on the population for information about police, military or government personnel, families, and sympathizers. The guerrillas sought out these people, trapped within the perimeter, and attempted to eliminate them. They would not risk informants and pockets of resistance within their lines.

Finally, the FMLN brought in large numbers of weapons with which to

arm members of the population that would join the fight. The purpose was both to increase the size of the guerrilla force and to replace losses suffered in the fighting. The FMLN set up basic military training sessions in which it trained those of the population who expressed a willingness to join the insurrection. Also, as weapons were captured from government paramilitary and military units, they were distributed to the new recruits. If efforts failed to organize the people, then they would serve as hostages. The hostage population would act as a shield to prevent the armed forces from using their heavy weapons. If the armed forces employed these weapons, the resulting civilian casualties would serve to accelerate the insurrection.¹⁰

POPULAR WEAPONS WORKSHOPS

The final element of FMLN urban tactics during 1989 was the establishment of Popular Weapons Workshops known as TAPs (*Talleres de Armas Populares*). The FMLN considered this element of its tactics as a pillar of urban fighting. Popular weapons would increase the guerrilla arsenal, provide weapons for arming civilian collaborators, and allow the improvisation of weapons as the situation dictated. Each neighborhood commander had a preselected TAP team that would begin operations as soon as the commander's unit entered the neighborhood. The TAP team coordinated with the agitation team to acquire the list of technically skilled civilians in the neighborhood. Then they mapped the neighborhood, in coordination with other neighborhood TAP teams, to locate factories, warehouses, metal shops, and hardware stores and work out a distribution and supply network of the tools and raw materials. According to the maps, technical personnel and skilled workers were then selected and organized into teams. Mobile and fixed, workshops and warehouses were organized to repair, make, and supply quantities of homemade weapons. The mobile shops were mounted on trucks and made the rounds of the peripheral positions to deliver their products.

Once the teams were organized, all types of tools and raw materials useful for the construction of popular weapons were collected at the shops. Priority was given to the manufacture of Molotov cocktails, grenades, shotguns, mortars, anti-tank and anti-personnel mines, homemade explosives, napalm, propulsion powders, and so on. The FMLN manuals taught how to make a number of explosives using combinations with potassium chloride oxidizers. This included combinations with vegetable carbon, sugar, asphalt, aluminium, and others. Combinations with ammonium nitrate fertilizer and fuel were another favorite.

Although the FMLN never advanced as far, it made plans for occupying the industrial zones of the city. In this case, it would have converted the heavy machinery to the production of weapons, and conducted train-

ing to instruct the workers in the manufacture and series production of weapons.¹¹

Ilopango Air Base, November 11, 1989– November 23, 1989

The tactical analysis of the “Until the Limit” offensive that the FMLN began on November 11, 1989 against the government (but especially against the ESAF) is perhaps the determining factor within the global context of the war, as the military defeat inflicted on the insurgent movement during this second urban offensive acted as a catalyst for the search for a negotiated settlement. It was during this offensive that the guerrillas finally faced the full power of the ESAF military development program that had been ongoing since 1981; power that neutralized the offensive within the first 72 hours of combat, although it took another six days for all of the points of resistance to be subdued. However, this military victory would not have been possible without the support that the ESAF had from the people of El Salvador, who fully rejected insurrection and opted instead to support the government troops.

“Until the Limit” was a large-scale campaign during which four main battles were fought: the battle for San Salvador, the battle for San Miguel, the battle for Zacatecoluca, and the battle for Usulután. The most important of these battles from a strategic point of view were the battles for the capital, San Salvador, and San Miguel, the main city of eastern El Salvador. Here the battle for San Salvador, especially the battle around the strategically important Ilopango air base, will be described.

There were four convergent guerrilla axes of attack, one of them against the air force in the northeast part of the city. The FMLN wanted to take the air base and destroy the aircraft there, because in doing so it would deny the ESAF the important tactical advantage of airpower. There are some indications that the FMLN even sent in guerrillas, trained as pilots, in the hope of capturing some of the planes and using them against the armed forces.¹² In destroying or capturing the air base, the guerrillas and the armed forces would have to face each other on roughly equal footing, an element that could contribute significantly to the success of the offensive. Ilopango air base was home to the most important concentration of military aircraft, as well as the parachute battalion and the army’s strategic special forces. Due to the importance of the objective, here the FMLN deployed the greatest number of guerrillas and its best cadres with the most combat experience. This force was amply supplied with support weapons such as recoilless rifles, mortars, machine guns, and so on.

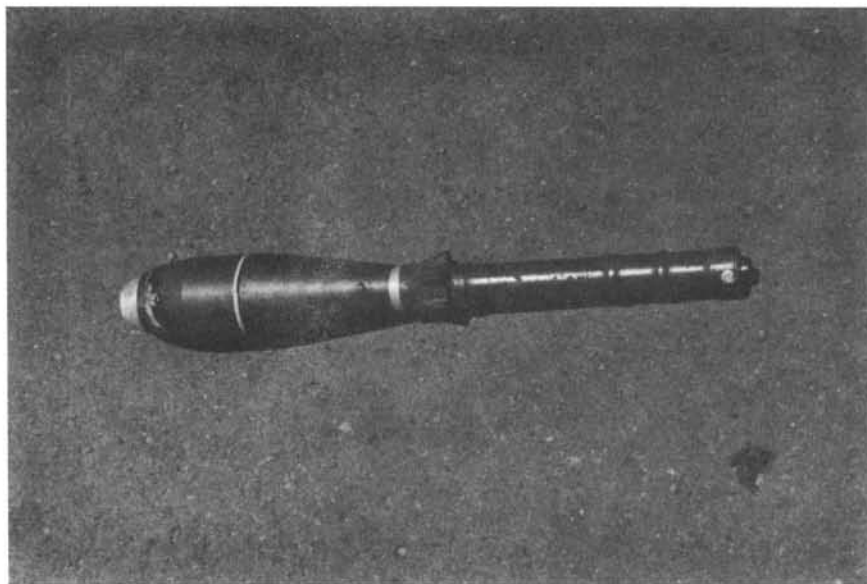
The FMLN had carried out extensive preparations prior to the offensive, with the idea of beginning the actions from within the capital. Far in

advance of the offensive it developed clandestine, urban guerrilla cells in the neighborhoods on the northeast perimeter of the air base. These in turn began to acquire tactically vital property such as corner houses and some intermediate houses in which they set up large caches of weapons, ammunition, explosives, mines, and so on. The logistical infrastructure of prelocated supply dumps became the points of concentration from which the guerrillas launched their attacks. This tactic of previous clandestine organization allowed guerrilla units to reach their concentration points without weapons or equipment, and thus pass through government-controlled territory without raising suspicion. During the afternoon and evening of November 11, 1989, a large number of open-air parties, community activities, funerals, soccer matches, and other events took place in the neighborhoods around the air base. While there was an unusual number of activities, these were not activities that were out of place for a Saturday afternoon and evening. These activities allowed the concentration of large numbers of people from outside the area, without arousing the suspicion of the public security forces and the peripheral security patrols of the air force.

Heavy weaponry was brought to the battlefield in small pickups. These same vehicles were then used for transportation of people, cargo, and for the evacuation of wounded. Large numbers of rifles were also carried in trucks to be handed out to the many civilians that it was anticipated would join the insurrection.

The guerrilla plan was to assault the air base under a curtain of massed support fire of mortars, recoilless rifles, and RPG-81s. At least one of the recoilless rifles was of enormous caliber. While the gun was never found, the Special Operations Group captured several Soviet-made rounds for the gun, about the same size as the American 106mm. The RPG-81 was a standard RPG-7 rocket launcher whose rockets had been modified by replacing the PG-7 warhead with the warhead of an 81mm or 82mm mortar round. The heavier warhead reduced the range to 300 meters. The weapon was fired indirectly, by a sight consisting of a carpenter's plum on the end of a string and compass attached to the rocket launcher. The advantage of this modification was that it gave the guerrillas a weapon with the firepower of an 81mm mortar and the weight of a light rocket launcher. The cost was range and accuracy, a price the FMLN was willing to pay because of the need for mobility.

The mortars and recoilless rifles were to provide cover fire while the guerrilla assault force approached the perimeter of the base. Then the recoilless rifles were to shift their fire to the aircraft parked on the runway. Along with the RPG-81s fired from in close, this support fire was to destroy or damage as many aircraft as possible. However, the attack did not go as planned. On the night of November 11, the forward elements of the FMLN assault force (reconnaissance elements and forward observ-



The RPG-81 warhead.

ers for the artillery) were prematurely intercepted by the routine security patrols of the base security battalion. Short, sharp firefights broke out all around the perimeter of the base. These were costly to the FMLN as many of its reconnaissance men and forward observers were killed or neutralized. This meant that the support artillery would be firing blind and that the assaulting force would attack without guides. The firefights around the base did not initially raise the alarm because for weeks prior to the attack the FMLN had been launching harassment and terrorist attacks against the base on an almost nightly basis. These attacks had become routine, and the air force and army personnel on the base had become accustomed to the noise and continued about their regular business. This was a clever pattern that the FMLN had established in preparation to move a large force to the perimeter of the base undetected. It was not until artillery rounds started falling on the base perimeter and the runway that there was any realization that this would not be a routine night. However, even though the fire was heavy, it was inaccurate because of the loss of the forward observers, and caused little damage. Not a single aircraft was hit. The assault forces were checked at the base perimeter by the base security battalion which, in some cases, levelled Yugoslav-made M-55 20mm triple-barrelled anti-aircraft guns posted around the perimeter and fired them directly into the masses of assaulting guerrilla forces. The tenacity of the security battalion gave the

parachute group and the special operations group time to mobilize and reach the perimeter. In addition, a single UH-1M helicopter was able to lift off, and it circled the base until it located the back blast of the recoilless rifles and put the FMLN artillery position out of action. However, the infantry fighting became fierce. To give an idea of the intensity, a single infantry company expended over 150,000 rounds of small arms ammunition on that first night. To the army troops defending the base, it seemed that for every round of rocket fire they fired at the guerrilla positions, they received seven in response. The guerrillas were well supplied with all the ammunition they could carry, more than the defending army forces. The same infantry company (mentioned above) had machine guns whose barrel rifling was completely worn out from excessive firing, and another few actually became so hot that the barrels warped and melted to the point where the bullets began coming out of the side of the weapon.

The guerrillas withdrew and set up a defensive line in the neighborhoods around the base. They were particularly strong in the Santos 1 and Santos 2 developments near a line of trees known as Los Conacastes. Here the FMLN had its command center for the operational control and the main logistical distribution point. This whole area had been converted into a virtual fortress of successive defensive lines dug into the row houses.

Each corner house had been turned into a bunker by digging fighting positions into the floors and reinforcing them with sand bags, knocking firing ports into the walls, and building overhead cover with furniture and beds. Each of these bunkers was connected with the rest of the defensive system by holes that had been knocked in the joining walls of each house. Two-story houses were occupied by snipers, observers, and command elements. However, the key element to the FMLN defense was the civilian population. The guerrillas forced the civilians to stay in the occupied neighborhoods as hostages in their own houses. The fortifications presented a tactical problem to the armed forces, but the presence of civilian hostages in the fortified neighborhoods was a political problem of much greater proportions because the death of civilians from army action would cause political repercussions that could not be undone. Great care had to be taken in the battle ahead to use only weapons of precision, and to be sure of the nature of a target before firing.

Because of the civilian population, aircraft were not used in the first days of the offensive except for observation. The main support element was the armored cars of the cavalry squadrons. However, all the corner houses were surrounded by mined, anti-vehicle barricades and occupied by anti-tank weapon operators. The armored vehicles, which were not tracked, were vulnerable to the mines and obstacles and attracted large numbers of anti-tank rockets. In the first hours of fighting, two vehicles

were quickly put out of action. The guerrilla RPG operators were backed up by sharpshooters who made infantry accompaniment of the armored cars nearly suicidal. Attempts were made to position the armored cars at a distance, where their heavy .50 caliber machine guns could be used beyond the maximum effective range of the RPGs. However, this was difficult because of the built-up nature of the neighborhoods. Many positions could not be fired on effectively from a relatively safe range, but this also worked in reverse. The houses and urban features that impeded armored car fire also impeded the field of vision of the RPG rocket launchers. Despite the danger, the cavalry squadrons braved the fire and led the assault, disregarding losses. This was done by standing off as far as possible and bringing the guerrilla corner positions under fire. Usually the distance was of a block or a block and a half, 100 to 150 meters. The armored cars operated in groups of three: one AML 90, a French-made armored car with a 90mm cannon, and two Cashuats. The Cashuats were Salvadoran-made armored cars, with a turret-mounted .50 caliber gun, and two side-mounted M-60 machine guns on pintle mounts, protected by armored shields. The armor was accompanied by a platoon or so of infantry. The Cashuats would lead, with the AML bringing up the rear. The lead Cashuat would have two extra M-60s added and several crewmen carrying LAW disposable anti-tank rockets. Usually the houses next to the barricades would be two-story buildings. The AML would use the 90mm gun to fire on the second story of the house, while the rear Cashuat would do likewise. This was to suppress RPG and sniper fire. The lead Cashuat would open fire on the barricade, using the heavy machine gun to break it apart and tear it down. Once this was accomplished, the men with the LAWs would fire anti-tank rockets at the barricades to explode the mines. After the barricade exploded, the infantry advanced under the cover fire from all three vehicles. The infantry would secure the position, and then the armored cars would advance to the next barricade. In addition, armored cars were used to evacuate wounded soldiers and bring in logistics. For their efforts, the cavalry paid a heavy price. While few of the armored cars were actually destroyed, nearly all of them suffered damage from anti-tank weapons, obstacles, and mines, and casualties among the crews were heavy.

Where armored cars weren't available the infantry manhandled ground-mounted .50 caliber guns into position. The parachutists even dragged out an old 106mm recoilless rifle, but were unable to use it because it was too heavy to put into position. An attempt was made to use mortars to blast the guerrillas out of the houses by dropping the rounds onto the relatively thin roofs, hoping the rounds would be heavy enough to penetrate and explode inside. However, with impact fuses the only type available, the infantry found that they tended to only blow a few shingles off.



A typical barricade used during the 1989 offensive. This one was in the neighborhood of Mejicanos. This position was abandoned before the armed forces reached it.

Because of the limitations of the support weapons, both tactical and political, the brunt of the fighting fell on the infantry soldiers of the Parachute Group, the Special Operations Forces Group, and the Bellosos Battalion. The Bellosos joined the air force troops shortly after the guerrillas failed to take the air base. Blocks had to be cleared house by house, street by street, block by block, and neighborhood by neighborhood. In this process, the FMLN employed its "lung tactic." The interconnecting passages between the houses were used to great effect. During the daylight hours the guerrillas would withdraw through these holes after a few minutes of resistance, and then, after the army had cleared the area, counterattack back through the tunnels into the cleared area to hit the army soldiers in the flanks and rear.

During the night, the FMLN attempted to launch spoiling attacks by penetrating the front lines and attacking from within the perimeter. These attacks were led by groups of guerrillas with rucksacks full of TNT, who moved in small groups, throwing massive quantities of explosives at anything that moved. Usually they would attempt to climb on the roofs and sneak up on the soldiers from above, using the principal of advantage of height. These attacks seemed designed to break armed forces morale by sowing panic and confusion among the soldiers. However, after the first experience the soldiers knew what to look for, and easily beat off the attacks. It was learned later from guerrilla prisoners that the attacks had a second purpose, and that was to distract army troops long enough that guerrillas, especially commanders and special purpose forces, who had been trapped in their fortified positions behind army lines, could escape. In this the FMLN guerrillas enjoyed a high degree of success. Another tactic used by the FMLN to distract the government forces was to set local business districts and factories on fire. The purpose was to distract large numbers of government forces to fight fires instead of the FMLN. However, the guerrillas failed in this, as the Salvadoran Fire Fighter Corps proved itself capable, even under sniper and machine gun fire, of putting out all of the major fires in the zone. No troops had to be detached to bail out the firemen.

Between the 11th and the 15th of November, combat was fierce, and while the FMLN was stopped from taking the air base, the attempt to drive it out of the neighborhoods was moving very slowly. On the third and fourth day of the offensive, the civilian population had had enough of the FMLN and, disregarding the guerrilla threats, they began a mass exodus from the guerrilla-occupied neighborhoods and crossed over to government lines. This was because high casualty rates among the front-line guerrillas forced the guerrillas who had been assigned to guard the civilians to abandon their posts and reinforce the front line. Left alone, the civilians fled the combat zone. The absence of civilian population in the combat zones suddenly made the use of a broader range of support

weapons possible. However, even though fire could be directed at guerrilla positions without fear of causing civilian casualties, the military still attempted to limit property damage. The air force began to experiment to see if it could use its air assets to deliver pinpoint fire on fixed targets without causing too much collateral damage. This was successful, and the use of helicopter gunships with rockets and miniguns was generalized. At no time did the air force ever use "bombers" or arm its aircraft with 100, 250, or 500-pound bombs. This accusation by the FMLN was a propaganda ploy. The basic unit, known as a Falcon Team, consisted of a single AC-47, an O-2A observation aircraft, two UH-1M gunships, and a Hughes 500. This represented command, recon, and attack elements. A Falcon group was kept in orbit over the battle zone for 24 hours. The Falcon unit was relieved by the replacement team in the air. This was done to guarantee round-the-clock support. Despite heavy anti-aircraft fire, and the threat of ground-to-air missiles, the air force operated both day and night. At night the air force found it could operate more effectively using night vision goggles. The advantage of operating at night was that the guerrillas' anti-aircraft fire was much less effective. At night, two Falcon teams operated over the combat zone and launched concentrated offensive operations all through the night. The accurate devastation was incredible.¹³

The combination of infantry assault, effective and accurate air support, and especially the abandonment of the guerrillas by the civilian populations proved to be too much for the FMLN forces near the air base. With lack of foresight and resources, the FMLN had committed all of its forces to the firing line and had failed to establish an effective reserve force that could change the battle's center of gravity and break through the army's noose. The army gained the initiative and with each passing hour the noose was tightened, limiting the guerrillas' freedom of action. Large numbers of guerrillas were taken prisoner. In mopping up the neighborhoods the soldiers captured huge quantities of weapons. The guerrillas' flight had been so hurried that they had failed to withdraw much of their logistical infrastructure for the offensive. Several large houses were discovered containing huge quantities of rifles, ammunition, and explosives. The most common were East German AK-47s, so new that they were still covered with packing grease. Many of the pickups carrying weapons for civilians were also found abandoned, and none of the weapons in the truck beds had been touched. Almost every guerrilla corpse was found carrying two bags slung over each shoulder loaded with two thousand rounds of ammunition. In addition, many of the guerrillas were found carrying sealed plastic bags in which a handkerchief was found soaking in lemon juice. At first these puzzled the soldiers, but guerrilla prisoners revealed to them that they were to be worn around the nose and mouth if the army used tear gas. Unfortunately for the armed forces,



Part of a haul captured by the air force paratroopers in a single house in Soyapango. Note the East German AK-47s, RPG-7 rounds, North Korean rifle grenades, Soviet grenades, machine guns, and RPG-7 launchers.

they did not have any tear gas. The United States had never provided them with this item.

Combined with the failure of the other guerrilla efforts throughout San Salvador, the guerrillas had only one way out and took it, starting a headlong withdrawal toward the Guazapa volcano. The armed forces pursued by maintaining pressure on the ground and by airlifting forces in behind the withdrawing guerrillas to act as stop groups. The pressure was such that the guerrillas were not able to reorganize their forces, or even to evacuate their wounded. For the Parachute Group, the Belloso Battalion, and the Special Operations Forces Group, this pursuit lasted for 40 kilometers and eleven straight days of uninterrupted combat.

The main failure of the FMLN was its evaluation that the civilian population in El Salvador was ready for insurrection. The people did not accept the weapons from the FMLN and did not support the offensive. When they had the chance, they fled from the guerrilla-occupied neighborhoods over to government lines. The bulk of civilian support was for the government troops, and without it the FMLN would probably have been victorious.

A second serious failure of the FMLN was to underestimate the ability of the armed forces to adjust to combat in urban terrain. The armed forces did suffer heavy initial casualties, but they learned quickly. The FMLN particularly underestimated the ability of the cavalry's armored cars and the air force's helicopters and gunships to operate against guerrilla positions in fortified urban centers.

Finally, the FMLN's failure to maintain serious reserve forces that could be used to change or modify the battle's center of gravity meant that, except for during the first day or two of the offensive, the military initiative was almost entirely in the hands of the armed forces.

NOTES

1. Marco Antonio Grande, "Frente de Masas," *Análisis* (January 1989).

2. FMLN, *Proyección de Trabajo del Equipo de Artillería Sin Cañon* (El Salvador, December 1980), captured from guerrillas in 1981.

3. Artillery without cannon is an explosive charge on a wooden ramp, launched by another explosive. Throughout the conflict, this type of artillery has not been too successful.

4. FPL, *Del Jefe y 20. Jefe del E.M.F. José Roberto Sibrián A La Comandancia General* (El Salvador, January 28, 1981). Report from the Zacatecoluca area on the guerrilla actions of the 1981 Final Offensive. Document captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

5. FMLN, *Tácticas de Combate Urbano* (El Salvador, 1989), captured from guerrillas in November 1989.

6. FMLN, *Tácticas de Combate Urbano*.

7. FMLN, *Instructivo para el Combate Urbano* (El Salvador, 1989), captured from guerrillas in November 1989.

8. FMLN, *Instructivo para el Combate Urbano*.

9. FMLN, *Tácticas de Combate Urbano*.

10. Interview with guerrilla neighborhood commander who defected to the government shortly after the 1989 offensive, San Salvador, July 1990.

11. FMLN, *Instructivo para el Combate Urbano*.

12. The Singlaub Commission, *The Singlaub Report on the November 1989 FMLN Offensive*, 1989.

13. The coauthor visited the guerrilla-held neighborhoods and can testify to the accuracy of the air force fire. A house (usually a corner house) that had been held by the guerrillas would be partially destroyed, while the houses that shared walls to either side would be completely untouched, except for a few bullet scars, and the communications holes knocked in either wall by the guerrillas.

Defensive Guerrilla Tactics

Defensive tactics included attrition operations such as anti-air combat, permanent and temporary minefields, sniper attacks, ambushes with mines and with small arms, and harassment with ramps and mortars. In addition, the FMLN considered patrols and searches, false camps, and the evasion maneuver as defensive tactics. The FMLN did not use defensive tactics to defend a static position; rather, defensive tactics were used to wear down and delay army units on the offensive. Terrain was defended not by holding it, but by inflicting heavy enough casualties on the enemy force that it could or would no longer continue to advance. If an enemy advance could not be contained, defensive tactics were used to delay advancing army units to allow FMLN combat forces and masses to evacuate the area.

ANTI-AIRCRAFT COMBAT

The FMLN felt that the primary advantage of the armed forces vis-à-vis the guerrillas was its possession and use of airpower. While in the early part of the war the Salvadoran air force was small and generally antiquated, the military developed ingenious methods to keep its air force flying, and equally ingenious tactics to give the armed forces the edge in any battle. When the military began receiving U.S. aid, one of its first priorities was to increase the size and power of the air force to give it a greater tactical edge over the insurgents. Maintaining this tactical edge remained one of the top priorities for the armed forces throughout the war. By the end of the conflict, the Salvadoran military possessed a formidable fleet of UH-1 and Hughes 500 transport, reconnaissance, and

attack helicopters, A-37 Dragonfly tactical bombers, AC-47 gunships, O-2 reconnaissance planes, and C-123, ARAVA, and C-47 cargo planes.

The effective use of airpower and airmobile units by the Salvadoran armed forces ended guerrilla ascendancy by 1985, and forced the FMLN to abandon its war of movement, disperse its units, and revert to guerrilla and attrition warfare.

Consequently, throughout the war the FMLN assigned high priority to the development and implementation of tactics and operations to destroy aircraft both on the ground and in the air. While it was never able to seriously change the balance of forces in its favor, the FMLN was sometimes able to inflict serious losses. These included the January 1982 FES attack on the Ilopango air base. In this raid, a group of six sapper commandos penetrated the air base undetected and destroyed or damaged 15 aircraft, including the majority of the armed forces helicopter fleet. In 1982, they shot down a helicopter touring the battlefield that was carrying Vice Minister of Defense Colonel Castillo. In 1984, they allowed their nemesis, Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, to capture Radio Venceremos and rigged the equipment with explosives. When the helicopter was in flight with the captured equipment, the guerrillas detonated the bomb, downing the helicopter and killing Colonel Monterrosa, his executive officer Major Azmitia, several other officers and soldiers, and a Catholic priest. Also in 1984, a FES squad clandestinely planted a mine on the Obrajuelo airstrip of San Miguel. This mine was detonated when a C-123 cargo plane landed on the runway. The list goes on.¹

The progressive improvement of FMLN anti-air tactics is clearly illustrated by Salvadoran army statistics. For example, during all of 1988, the guerrillas damaged 47 aircraft by groundfire. During the first six months of 1989, half the time, the guerrillas damaged 96, over twice as many aircraft, by groundfire.²

The FMLN believed that destroying aircraft would accomplish four tasks: (1) impede the mobility of the armed forces, (2) impede close air support, (3) impede resupply, and (4) impede evacuation of wounded troops. The FMLN believed that the army was dependent on airpower, if not physically then psychologically, and would no longer be able to fight without air support. The logical evolution of this idea to the FMLN was that if the army lost its air support it would lose the war.³

In the early years, the FMLN did not have a great deal of training in anti-air tactics. The experiences of Castro's guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra, or the Sandinista guerrillas against Somoza's rickety air force, did not prepare the FMLN for the Salvadoran air force, which was qualitatively superior. Guerrillas were merely taught that if under attack, they should fire up in the air at the plane with everything they had to create a wall of lead. However, they soon discovered that if the wall of lead didn't hit anything, it would not shoot aircraft out of the sky either. In the early

fighting, the presence or lack of airpower had less impact, since the Salvadoran military was so short of aircraft and had to spread its resources. However, as the military received greater amounts of U.S. aid, it was able to mass its airpower on individual targets, and here the FMLN began to suffer extensive losses. The FMLN turned to the lessons of Vietnam for help. The result was that the FMLN developed special anti-aircraft units to increase the effectiveness of its tactics. In Vietnam, the North Vietnamese army had enjoyed massive Soviet and Chinese support that included large- and medium-caliber anti-aircraft guns and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). For both logistical and political reasons, the FMLN was never able to obtain either type of heavy weaponry. It was not until the last three years of the war that portable SAMs became available, and prior to that the FMLN guerrillas were only able to obtain a small number of heavy caliber machine guns. As a consequence, FMLN anti-aircraft tactics were developed almost exclusively for small arms and improvised weapons.

PRINCIPLES FOR AN EFFECTIVE ANTI-AIRCRAFT DEFENSE

There were six fundamental principles of anti-aircraft combat: (1) use of appropriate weapons, (2) use of appropriate ammunition, (3) effective tactical positioning, (4) concentration of fire, (5) fire at the moment of maximum vulnerability of the craft, and (6) fire against flying and diving aircraft.

To the FMLN, appropriate anti-aircraft weapons were the largest caliber infantry weapons with the longest effective range. This meant such weapons as G-3 rifles, FN FALs, Dragunov sniper rifles, M-60, RPK, and M-2 .50 caliber machine guns. RPG-2 rocket launchers and 90mm recoilless cannon were deemed effective against hovering helicopters, as well as the RPG-7, which was also effective against aircraft flying up to 2,800 feet.⁴

The FMLN soon realized that firing against moving aircraft was difficult at best, largely because where your bullets were striking could not be observed with ordinary ammunition, making corrections of aim difficult. The FMLN solved this problem by issuing tracer ammunition to its anti-aircraft units. This made adjustment of fire much easier. Tracer ammunition was also found to have the added benefit of a tendency to set aircraft on fire. FMLN anti-air units were instructed to load one tracer round to every two normal rounds in both magazine- and belt-fed weapons. In most conventional armies, the ratio is one tracer for every four normal rounds, so the FMLN felt that a higher proportion of tracer rounds was more effective for anti-aircraft purposes.⁵

The FMLN discovered that the most effective way to knock down or damage an aircraft was to catch it in a cross fire. FMLN anti-air units became very adept at setting up effective positions that allowed them to

fire on an aircraft from several directions simultaneously. It was better not to fire than to fire from an inadequate position, and guerrillas were instructed that if they were not part of the position, they were not to fire. The FMLN generally used two patterns, the triangular position and the circular position. The triangular position was used when only a small number of guerrillas were part of the anti-aircraft team. The corners of the triangle were occupied to provide the best angles of fire for the small numbers of weapons. The circular position was used when larger numbers of guerrillas were part of the anti-aircraft force.⁶

The FMLN felt that the principal characteristic of conventional anti-aircraft cannon that made them so effective was their high volume of fire. These weapons could concentrate a great number of projectiles against a moving target in a very short time. Anti-aircraft machine guns and cannon usually had multiple barrels that could fire simultaneously. This was the key element that made them so effective, and it led the FMLN to conclude that if this type of cannon and machine gun was unavailable, and it only had rifles and light machine guns, it should use several weapons of the type it had together, simultaneously, to bring concentrated fire against the target in an attempt to closely simulate conventional anti-aircraft weapons. Weapons were never to be fired singly at aircraft, or from isolated positions where only one weapon could be brought to bear on an aircraft at one time.⁷

To make its fire even more effective, since it had only light weapons, the FMLN instructed its troops that aircraft should be fired on when the target was at its most vulnerable point. Altitude was the key element. The general rule was that the lower an aircraft was, the more vulnerable it was to ground fire. In addition, the FMLN found that the A-37 and O-2 airplanes were most vulnerable during dives, and guerrillas were taught to fire at the nose of the plane. Helicopters were viewed as most vulnerable during descent, landing, and takeoff since they had to diminish their speed to carry out these maneuvers. Anti-aircraft units were taught to maintain strict fire discipline until these moments presented themselves, and to then open up a violent, concentrated barrage. Until the latter part of the war, higher-flying aircraft were nearly invulnerable to groundfire.

The FMLN used the principle of leading fire. This very simple principle states that, since an aircraft is flying at great speeds, fire is not aimed directly at it because by the time the bullets reach the target area, the target will not be there. Instead, depending on the speed and distance of the aircraft, the point of aim is one or two imaginary body lengths in front of the aircraft. In this way, the aircraft and the bullets reach the target area at the same time.⁸

An experience from a captured guerrilla document illustrates some of these principles:

On 20 September 1985, the army Bracamonte battalion started to advance. One column went toward El Chile and a second advanced later along the road through San Bartolo. The two groups each marched along the respective road in columns of twos. The guerrilla defenders consisted of 1st platoon, 1st Detachment and were deployed in squad-size elements. One squad was on the slope of El Filo Hill, another was on San Bartolo Hill at a place known as El Caracol. The third squad was at the road junction to La Soledad and El Sunqueque. The 1st platoon had a good reputation in the use of the new guerrilla tactics. It began to conduct individual squad harassing attacks. During the first engagement the enemy suffered one casualty from rifle fire. The platoon conducted a fighting withdrawal down the road, harassing the enemy with sniper fire and laying mines in the troops' path. In the second engagement, another casualty was caused by rifle fire, after which the guerrillas withdrew. When the enemy troops reached the recently evacuated position, a mine was tripped which caused a further five casualties, including a sergeant. These two firefights occurred all within the space of 45 minutes, after which the enemy set up camp at Sunqueque. The mine exploded on the road near our camp where the enemy in a previous offensive had cleared a spot for a helicopter to land. At that time the guerrilla 1st platoon had withdrawn to the camp of the guerrilla battalion central services, at which the battalion command was located. The enemy was on the road. The guerrillas surmised that a helicopter would come to evacuate the wounded so they sent an anti-aircraft squad with five 7.62mm rifles and an M-60 machine gun. Their mission was to shoot down the helicopter. The clearing where the helicopter would land was 150 meters away, and the squad moved to within 50 meters of the clearing and set up a triangular position. The plan was to allow the helicopter to land and then when it was taking off, put up a cone of fire. However, when the helicopter landed, the comrades had not adequately evaluated the terrain. The helicopter landed on the side of a hill, and when it took off, it did not take off vertically as expected, but took off hugging the hill and then gained altitude out of the comrades' range.⁹

COMBAT AGAINST AIRMOBILE TROOPS

The FMLN believed that airmobile troops have two basic functions: transportation of infantry units during offensive operations (Shock), and transportation of infantry units during defensive missions (Reinforcement). Combined with aerial attack, this was the primary advantage of the government over the FMLN. Preventive measures against airmobile landings was a priority in FMLN planning. FMLN units were ordered to study the terrain in their area or at an objective and find all possible helicopter landing sites. In both defensive and offensive operations, plans were to be made to defend against helicopter landings. All flat terrain such as open fields, soccer fields, and so on were to be given special attention, since they offered excellent conditions for the simultaneous landing of a number of helicopters. Weapons were distributed to the various units to set up the anti-aircraft positions to prevent army troop

landings. When the FMLN attacked or defended it usually occupied all dominant heights in the vicinity of possible landing zones.

A second measure was to always have a reaction force in reserve. Rapidly containing an airmobile force was considered the best tactical response. An airmobile force was very vulnerable during landing, and reaction forces could take advantage of this moment of vulnerability and either shoot the force out of the landing zone, or, if they acted at the right moment, actually destroy the landing force.¹⁰

One of the best combat examples where the FMLN, particularly forces of the FPL, applied all of its anti-aircraft experience in a single engagement occurred during the winter of 1988. The guerrillas launched a large-scale attack against the town of Suchitoto, which lies on the southern shore of Lake Suchitlan. Throughout the war, Suchitoto had been a favorite target of the guerrillas because it was hard for the armed forces to reinforce. From the north, Suchitoto was cut off because of the lake. To the south, the main access routes to Suchitoto passed by the guerrilla stronghold of the Guazapa volcano. It was very easy to launch incursions against the roads into town and make it very costly to reinforce the town by land. The only ways to reinforce the town effectively were either by air or by the lake. The Salvadoran armed forces did not have the resources to maintain a permanent fleet of boats on the lake, so the only really practical means was by air. During the early part of the war, the guerrillas had continually laid siege to Suchitoto and even attempted to take the town by assault. All efforts had failed. Suchitoto became somewhat of a symbol to the armed forces of a town that refused to fall to the FMLN. Because of the continual assaults and sieges, the National Police created a special battalion, the Pantera Battalion, to defend Suchitoto. After this permanent garrison was established, attacks against Suchitoto diminished in intensity if not frequency.

In 1988, the FMLN again decided to launch an attack against Suchitoto. This time the objective would not be the town itself, but the reinforcements sent by the armed forces to relieve pressure on the garrison. The assault began as usual (around midnight, from the south), but instead of dying down before daylight, it continued throughout the morning and even increased in intensity. The position of the Panther battalion was becoming precarious because the number of men physically in Suchitoto were few, and the guerrillas were massing a lot of firepower on individual targets. In short, the situation was becoming untenable, and the guerrillas were beginning to gain ground in the town. At this point the battalion commander called for reinforcements, which were sent. A battalion of parachutists was dispatched from the Ilopango air base to relieve the pressure on the policemen by landing behind the guerrillas to the south, catching the guerrillas between two fires, and rolling them up by advancing toward the city. Everything went normally until the helicopters

attempted to land. As soon as they began to descend and hover, fire began to erupt from everywhere along the landing zone. Alternative landing zones were selected, and these too erupted in masses of tracers from automatic weapons. The problem around Suchitoto was that because of the terrain, there were only a few places suitable for helicopter landings, and they were all surrounded by multiple triangular and circular anti-aircraft positions. Nearly a dozen helicopters were hit and limped back to Ilopango for repairs. One craft was hit in the turbine and forced down, but it was salvagable and the crew escaped unharmed. The fire was so accurate partially because the FMLN used a relatively new device. Every weapon in the ambush positions was equipped with a special, detachable sight developed by the FMLN to help the guerrillas use their small arms for leading fire, a key principle to hit aircraft (see Figure 5).

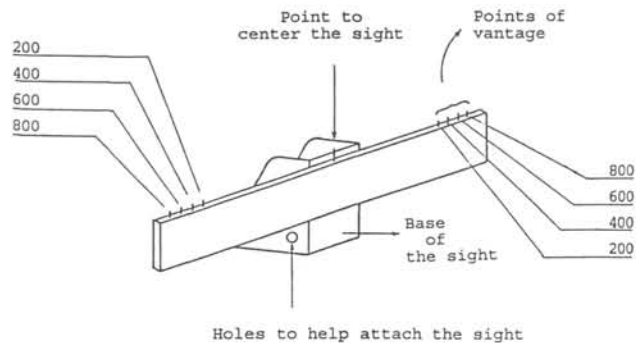
Once the paratroopers were on the ground, they had to fight off the guerrilla mobile reserve, which struck repeatedly at the paratroopers. In addition, they had to fight their way through numerous ambushes, harassing attacks, and minefields to reach the Pantera Battalion. It took several days of intense fighting to break through, at a high cost in men and aircraft. The attack against the Pantera Battalion had been a setup, and the real objective had been to ambush the landing force and their aircraft.

HOMEMADE FMLN AA WEAPONS

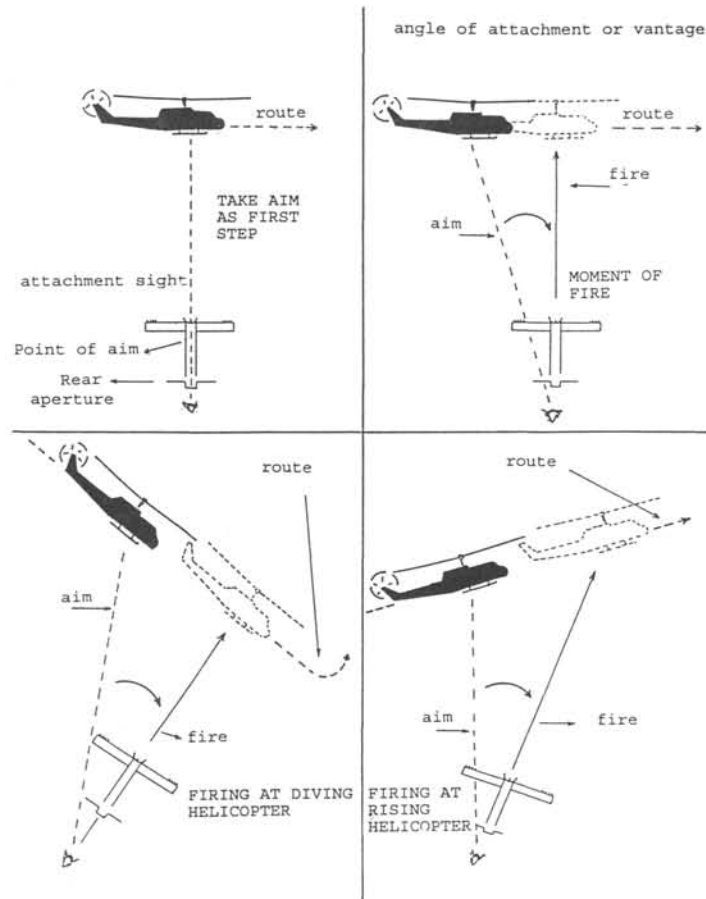
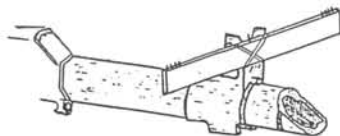
The sight used at Suchitoto was developed by the FMLN in the latter part of the war for their anti-aircraft units; this sight could be attached to the front sight of most standard weapons, especially the AK-47, the RPK machine gun, and the RPG-7 rocket launcher. This was basically a cross bar centered on the sight post with four inches of wood extending to either side of the sight and graduated pins in each end, representing different calculations for speed and distance of the aircraft. The technique was to make a mental calculation of the speed and distance of the aircraft, place the appropriate pin on the nose of the aircraft, and fire. These devices were crude and simple to make, but effective. Different versions were developed for the AK-47, the RPK, and the RPG-7 rocket launcher.¹¹

Early in the war, the FMLN made several requests for portable SAMs. However, the Cubans and Nicaraguans refused because they believed that this would invoke the wrath of Washington and provide the catalyst for an invasion of Sandinista Nicaragua. The FMLN continually requested these weapons, and the Cubans and Nicaraguans steadfastly and continually refused. In 1985, the Salvadoran air force captured a crude training diagram of an SA-7 Strella missile.¹² However, they did not appear on the battlefield at that time. In early 1989, an entire technical training manual was captured indicating their pending arrival,¹³ and finally, in late

Figure 5
The FMLN-developed Anti-aircraft Sight for Small Arms and Its Use



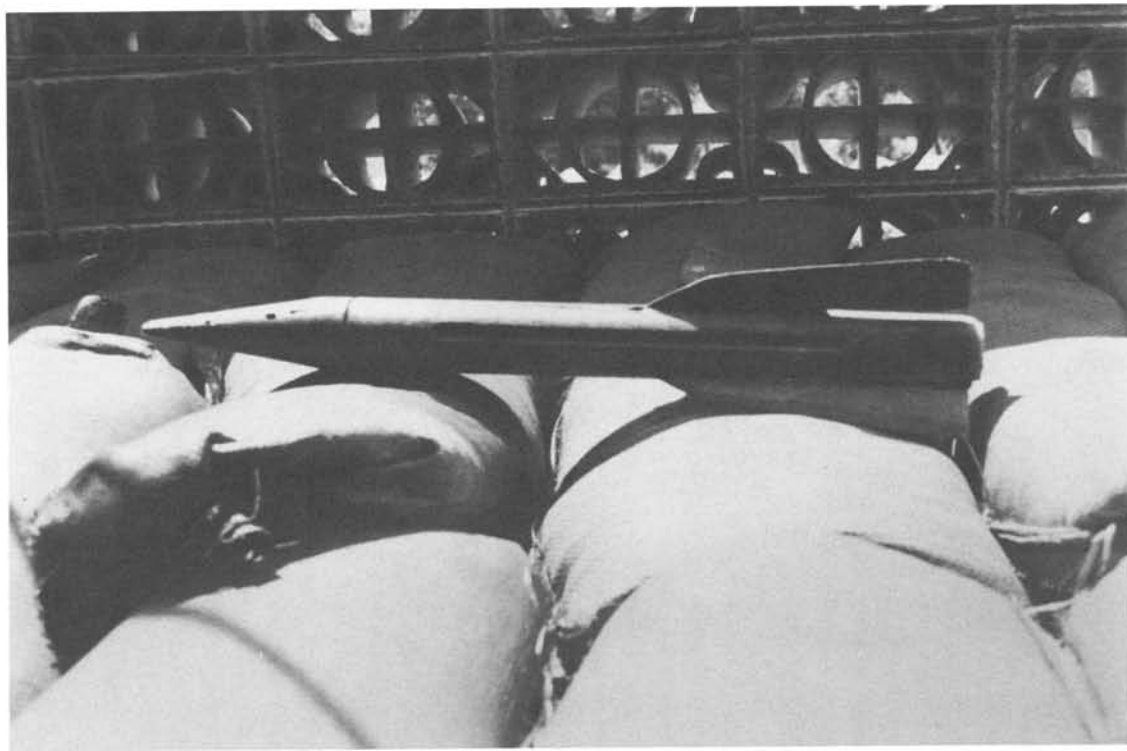
WAY TO TIE ON THE ATTACHMENT SIGHT



November 1989, a plane load of SA-7s and a Redeye missile that the Sandinistas had captured from the Nicaraguan Contras crashed and was captured in eastern El Salvador. Soon thereafter, the FMLN received the SA-14 and by the end of the war even some SA-16s. However, until the arrival of these weapons, the FMLN had to make do. Since the beginning of the war the FMLN had manufactured homemade rifle grenades. By 1984, it had perfected and standardized a single design, which was manufactured on all of the major fronts. Manufacturing standards differed according to materials available for their construction. Around that same time, the FMLN adapted the rifle grenade design for anti-aircraft use. Essentially, instead of exploding on impact, a new fuse was added which was designed to explode at altitude. The user was supposed to fire the grenade straight up into the air.¹⁴ The problem was that the grenades did not reach a very high altitude, and were therefore ineffective.

In 1988, another weapon appeared, called the CC1 or C2, in an apparent attempt to make up for the deficiencies of the grenades. This was a fiberglass body rocket, supposedly manufactured at a clandestine shop in Nicaragua. It was about two feet in length with three stabilization fins. It was fired from a cup that was placed over the end of an AK-47 muzzle. The gasses from a blank round would ignite a nitroglycerine motor, which would propel the rocket at great speed up to an adequate height, where a proximity fuse would set it off near the aircraft.¹⁵ A number of these were used in Morazan, and rumors about them by captured guerrillas caused quite a stir, because it was thought that the FMLN was receiving SA-7s. However, few were ever used because they were soon superseded by the much superior SA-7s, and none are known to have shot down a plane or helicopter.

A final weapon that appeared before the arrival of the SAMs was a curious weapon that showed up during the 1989 offensive. It consisted of a short, crude body with a pistol grip, a flimsy, folding wire stock, and two box devices with eight tubes each that looked a lot like miniature versions of smoke dischargers on tanks and armored vehicles. One of the boxes was mounted on top of the body, while the other was slung loosely below. This was essentially a multiple flare gun, the flares having been modified by adding explosives and shrapnel to destroy rather than illuminate. It was fired in salvos. The first salvo was fired into the air from the box on the body and then slid off and the second box put in its place and fired. Theoretically, a guerrilla could rapidly fill an area above him with exploding shrapnel. While no aircraft were shot down, several low-flying helicopters and attack planes suffered damage from this device. Its primary weakness was that the flares could not hold enough explosive and shrapnel to cause serious damage.



The CC1 or C2 anti-aircraft rocket made of red fiberglass. The grooves between the tail and the fins are used to fit the rocket into a special cup that fits over the muzzle of an AK-47 rifle.

TACTICAL USE OF SURFACE-TO-AIR MISSILES

Except for the U.S.-backed Contras, the Salvadoran FMLN has been the only Latin American guerrilla group to obtain and use man-portable surface-to-air missiles. The main types of weapons used were the C-2M Arrow (SAM-7), (SAM-14), and SAM-16. As mentioned before, the missiles entered the guerrilla arsenal in November 1989, but the greatest use of these weapons was made during 1990 and 1991. Since the FMLN possessed relatively few of these missiles, the weapons were carefully used, usually in operations designed to put pressure on the government during the peace negotiations.

The tactical use of these weapons was initially for defensive purposes, mainly the protection of command posts, and to spoil helicopter landings. Later, as supplies became greater and the FMLN gained further experience, they were used to shoot down any aircraft flying over the persistence zones, with the purpose of diminishing the effectiveness of the air force and lowering the morale of the pilots.

One of the most common tactics was to purposefully maim and wound, not kill, enemy soldiers and then use these as bait to shoot down the evacuation helicopters. Another common technique was to attack isolated armed forces or security forces positions which would then call in air support in the form of AC-47 gunships, A-37 attack planes, and O-2A spotter planes. Ambush locations would be set up previously on the dominating heights around the position to shoot down the planes when they were busy providing air support. Four aircraft, a UH-1, an AC-47, an O-2, and an A-37 Dragonfly, were shot down using these techniques.

After these techniques were used a few times, the armed forces developed methods to overcome them. The air force pilots, considered by many experts to have the most experience throughout all of Latin America, improvised and came up with effective tactical responses. They noticed that all of the aircraft that had been shot down had been flying alone, unsupported by other aircraft. They also noticed that when the FMLN had brought down an aircraft, it had only done so by shooting three or more missiles. Aircraft had never been shot down by shooting only one missile.

The ambush of medivac helicopters was overcome by placing more medics up front with the combat troops and developing methods to stabilize the casualties until they could be evacuated at night. Without visibility, the SAMs could not be used effectively, and the FMLN had no night sights.

To neutralize missile positions the air force began to employ several aircraft simultaneously. The operative principle was that each aircraft would watch out for the other, and the air force would take advantage of an FMLN weakness. It took the FMLN three or more missiles to bring

down an aircraft because the guerrillas could not afford to adequately train their operators. They did not have the resources to buy practice missiles and other training aids. The only training they got was theoretical, and the first missiles fired were in combat.

Hughes 500 reconnaissance helicopters would skim the ground flying nap of the earth to locate the missile operator. Layered behind the Hughes 500s at different altitudes would be UH-1Ms with miniguns and rockets, AC-47s with four .50 caliber machine guns, and A-37 Dragonflies. The Hughes 500, with a side-mounted minigun, would immediately engage the missile operator, once located, to keep him busy, and call in the other aircraft. As soon as the other aircraft were on station, the Hughes 500 would break, allowing the UH-1M and then the AC-47 to pour down fire with a continuous stream of lethal metal to fix the SAM operators in place. This would be followed by A-37s that would launch 500-pounds bombs, one after another, onto the position. This effectively suppressed or destroyed the missile and its operator until operations were concluded. This technique proved to be very useful, and almost completely neutralized the FMLN's missile forces.

EXPLOSIVES AS A POPULAR WEAPON

By the end of the war, the extensive use of mines became the FMLN's principal means of inflicting casualties of attrition against the armed forces. From very limited employment at the first of the war, the FMLN turned the use of homemade mines into a fine-tuned art on a massive scale.

The FMLN recognized the value of mines from the very beginning of the war, but thought of them as an auxiliary weapon to increase firepower such as in an ambush, or as a special weapon to be used for specifically designed attacks, assassinations, booby traps, and so on. Mines were used as a defensive device around a camp perimeter to slow down attacking troops or to give early warning of an enemy advance. A good example of this type of mine was the contact mine, essentially a bit of sensitive explosive wrapped up in masking tape with rocks. If one of these devices was accidentally kicked or dropped, there would be friction between the rocks and the explosive powder and it would go off, producing a loud bang. It was hoped that the rocks would then fragment into shrapnel and produce a wounded soldier. Their greatest effect, however, was psychological, and they were often as dangerous to the user as the target. The FMLN also used mines as a force multiplier. Usually, this meant that they were used to increase the power of an ambush or other attack. The most common of these was the homemade claymore mine, which the FMLN called the "abanico" or fan mine. Nearly as effective as its factory-produced cousin, the U.S. claymore, the fan mine was made out of wood,

filled with explosives and shrapnel, and usually command-detonated by an electrical circuit. This mine was primarily used for road ambushes against soft vehicles and columns of marching soldiers. The fan mine very closely resembled the claymore in employment, was set up facing the target area, and only camouflaged by a bit of brush or grass, never buried. For road ambushes it was sometimes accompanied by a mine known to the guerrillas as the Vietnamese mine. This was a shaped charge mine used against vehicles such as trucks and armored personnel carriers. It looked pretty much like a typical anti-tank mine, a tin-pan shape; however, it could be distinguished by a funnel on the top of the mine and one off to the side. This mine could be either pressure or command detonated.

A number of other types of mines and booby traps were employed, but none were standard. As mentioned above, the guerrillas viewed mines as an auxiliary weapon, and not as a primary weapon. This would all change beginning in 1985.

1984 and 1985 were peak years for the Salvadoran armed forces. In 1984, the United States began giving the Salvadoran military not only enough aid to defend itself, but enough aid to carry out sustained, combined-arms offensive operations. The aid allowed the Salvadorans to bring the size of the army up to over fifty-thousand men and completely reequip and train their entire force. It also allowed the Salvadorans to acquire up to 60 transport helicopters and several new combat aircraft. This gave the government forces a mobility they had never known before. With their newly acquired equipment, numbers, and mobility, the Salvadoran military began to inflict a string of defeats on the guerrilla forces, and to severely erode their numbers. It became impractical for the FMLN to move around in large units because these were soon spotted and attacked by aircraft and air-landed troops. This forced the FMLN to adopt a new strategy, which is discussed more thoroughly in another section of this book. However, one of the weapons that was emphasized in this new strategy was the land mine.

The FMLN benefitted greatly from the experiences of African insurgents in Angola against the Portuguese, and Zimbabwe against the white Rhodesians. This experience was probably passed on to them directly, or vicariously through the Cubans. The Cubans had a very close relationship with the ruling party in Angola, the MPLA, who had practiced extensive mine warfare against the Portuguese as well as other African terrorist groups. Cuban troops would officially remain in Angola until 1989.

Extensive and massive use of mines had three purposes: (1) to severely restrict army movement, especially in the guerrilla zones of influence (Morazan, Chalatenango, Guazapa Mountain in particular), (2) to wear down the morale of the army through attrition, and (3) to inflict high

numbers of casualties against government troops at a low cost to the guerrillas.¹⁶

The FMLN began experimenting with guerrilla tactics and the massive use of mines in early 1985. The following is an excerpt from a guerrilla document that describes the first use of the new experimental tactics with mines (see Figure 6).

Experience during the Atonal Battalion's Offensive in the Municipality of Angela Montano

The enemy initiated their advance on April 21, 1985 through the North sector trying to cover the area of Valle Nuevo in support of a helicopter landing in the Para-Central front. On that day a guerrilla squad mined Valle Nuevo while the rest of the guerrillas remained at Linares.

There was confirmed enemy movement in the Montañita sector. In response a guerrilla squad was placed at El Pilon, one was placed to cover the road at Montañita, another squad was placed at Loma de la Cruz, one was sent to cover the road from San Marcos to Letran and Linares and another squad remained in reserve.

April 22. At 1300 hours the enemy tripped a booby trap at Los Cocos, Valle Nuevo. At 1800 hours the guerrillas concentrated at Linares.

During the night the detachment command met with the squad leaders who had been covering the positions to evaluate enemy activity. Based on their assessment the guerrilla troops were assigned to four positions: Loma de la Cruz, the road to Montañita, El Pilon, and the road that goes down to San Marcos. One squad was held in reserve. There were five to eight guerrillas in each squad, distributed according to the most likely paths of enemy advance.

Each squad was ordered to mine the terrain in front of their positions. The squad on Loma de la Cruz mined the main path. This squad also mined the draw that led to the field hospital at Valle Nuevo below Los Cocos. The road to Montañita was also mined. At 0900 the enemy appeared, patrolling in column along an upper trail. This was covered by two comrades while the lower path was covered by three comrades. The enemy was 600 meters away. When they came down to within fifteen meters comrade "Moris" fired and killed a soldier. The soldiers stopped, and after fifteen minutes a helicopter came to evacuate the dead man. The army troops at Montañitas then tried to come down and envelop the guerrillas at 1500 hours. However they ran into a mined area and detonated another explosive. On a little elevation 500 meters from the booby trap there were five comrades. After a few minutes a helicopter arrived again to evacuate the mine casualty. The five comrades on this elevation put up a cone of fire, but were not able to shoot down the helicopter and could not tell if they caused any casualties.

April 23. In the morning the guerrillas mined further ahead of where the booby trap had gone off. Then five comrades moved down the stream that led to the hospital and mined the trail leading down to the well. Two comrades moved up to the upper trail. At 1000 hours the enemy advanced in a column through the upper trail. The soldiers were allowed to get within fifteen meters of the guer-

illas, that is five meters from the mouth of the stream when a comrade jumped up and fired two shots at one of the soldiers who fell down. The soldiers tried to follow the guerrillas up the stream, and others tried to cut them off by using the upper trail to gain the advantage in terrain. The guerrillas were running very fast as the army were only 150 meters away and closing. They were yelling "run, there go those @##*!!" when they set off another mine. The wounded were screaming, and screaming so loudly that guerrillas over one kilometer away at Loma de la Cruz could hear them. The guerrillas now withdrew calmly and took up another position, that still maintained a line of sight on the enemy at Los Cocos.

In the afternoon the guerrillas withdrew towards Linares and met up with the others. They discussed the positive aspects of the action that had occurred with the CG squad. All the casualties had been inflicted by the guerrillas of that platoon, and the main unit hadn't even gone into action.

April 24. The guerrillas decided to rest and put out sentries around the area where the troops were that day. During the night, the enemy advanced toward Linares avoiding all of the mined areas that had been set up at Loma de la Cruz, Montañita and El Pilon.

The enemy made a pincer movement with two columns. The first was in Valle Nuevo on the banks of the Lempa. The troops at Montañita advanced along stream beds. At Linares the comrades had two sentries and, ahead of the Hacienda, another two on a trail that led to the Committee camp on a dominant elevation.

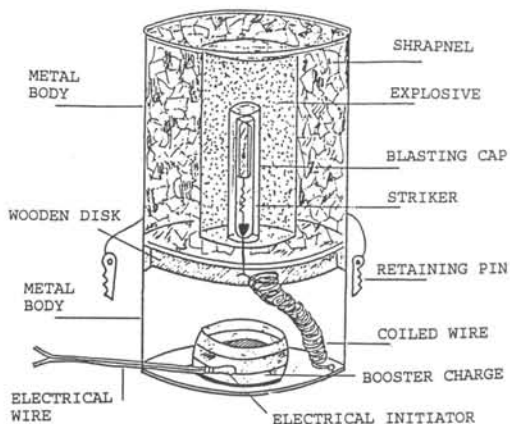
The comrades on guard duty at the Hacienda allowed the enemy to get within ten meters and then opened fire on the column, inflicting two casualties: one dead and one wounded. The two guards then withdrew calmly to join the rest of the guerrillas. The enemy called in 105mm artillery fire, which rained down fiercely, but caused no casualties. After the artillery fire, the guerrillas mined that area and withdrew to Panteón de Santa Clara.

The enemy stayed in Linares and at 1500 hours withdrew from that area. At 1530 they set off another mine. The enemy battalion commander told the troops not to walk along the trails any more. The enemy column was to only move through thick brush. At Letran we had set up a claymore, but the enemy turned toward the road 100 meters before reaching the mine. The comrades set it off anyway causing one more army casualty. As the helicopter had just picked up one casualty, the comrades decided to go down and attack the soldiers providing security for the helicopter to pick up the new casualty. However, the helicopter arrived first. The comrades came out of the place where they had set off the mine and went down to the road to Linares, and moved toward the town. They soon ran into the enemy, 100 meters away and opened fire inflicting another casualty. The enemy fired back with .50 caliber machine gun, M-60 machine guns and 105mm cannon fire. The comrades withdrew back to Panteón without incident.

The first casualties caused that day were by the UV platoon. It was a good experience, because ten casualties were inflicted on elite troops with a small force. The weapons were used skillfully. Because of this action, the comrades gained confidence in the extensive use of mines and harassing ambushes. Since April 25th, the enemy has not penetrated deeply into this controlled zone.¹⁷

Figure 6
FMLN-developed and Manufactured Land Mines

ATONAL
JUMPING MINE



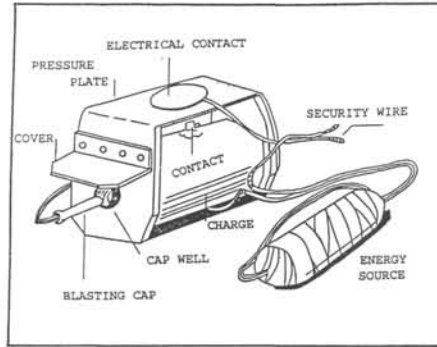
OPERATION OF JUMPING MINE



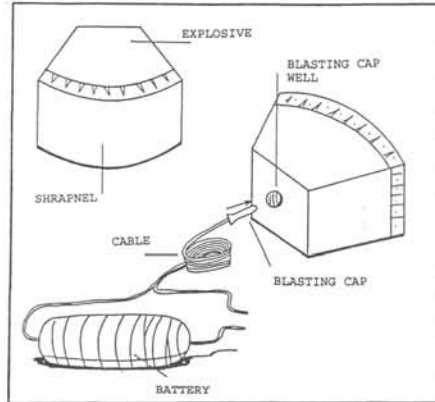
- 1--MINE ACTIVATED BY STEPPING ON PRESSURE PLATE
- 2--BOOSTER CHARGE EXPLODES PROPELLING MINE UPWARDS TO THE END OF THE COILED WIRE WHICH STARTS INITIATOR
- 3--EXPLOSION OF THE MINE AND SPREAD OF SHRAPNEL

Figure 6 (continued)

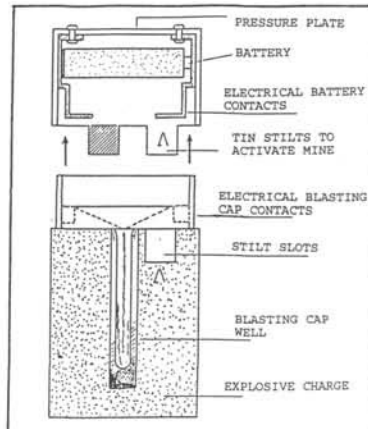
ATLACATL MINE



ARCE 1
ANTI-VEHICLE MINE



MORAZAN MINE



El Salvador is a densely populated country, and the FMLN knew that if it used mines on this scale there would be large numbers of civilian casualties. While FMLN directives supposedly ordered the guerrillas to take precautions and warn the population, in practice this was only occasionally done. If the civilian population knew about the mines, the army would usually find out, since it had numerous sympathizers among the civilian population. The FMLN chose to accept the civilian casualties because it felt that the alternative was to allow the army unrestricted movement with the accompanying high guerrilla casualty rates. For every two soldiers killed or wounded by mines there was one civilian who suffered a similar fate.¹⁸ This included men, women, and children. After over seven years of heavy mine warfare, the cost to society of maintaining and rehabilitating those people (soldiers and civilians) injured and maimed by mines is one of El Salvador's most daunting problems.

In FMLN tactical jargon there were two types of minefields, tactical and permanent. Tactical mining consisted of setting up minefields for use during a specific battle where the armed forces would be lured, drawn, or forced into mined areas. Permanent minefields were set up for long-term use around tactically and strategically important locations, such as in guerrilla areas of persistence, around camps, logistical caches, or command centers.¹⁹

There were several common methods used in tactical minefields. The first, the use of mines in ambushes, has already been discussed. However, there were three other common methods. Often, army forces would locate a guerrilla unit and begin pursuit with the intention of cornering the guerrillas and annihilating them. The army enjoyed much success with this tactic during its series of offensives during Operation "Fenix." Essentially, army units would drive the guerrillas into preselected kill zones, where another unit would set up an ambush along with fire from artillery and attack planes. The guerrillas suffered heavy casualties during these operations and began to develop counter-measures. They found that if they could put several minutes' distance between themselves and the pursuing army unit, they could set up an improvised minefield. The pursuing army unit would then blunder into the minefield, suffer several casualties, and the armed forces' efforts would be concentrated on evacuating their dead and wounded instead of operating the kill zone. This would often give the guerrilla unit enough time to escape the army trap.²⁰

The solution to this problem was for army units to make sure they maintained constant pressure and contact against a discovered guerrilla unit. If for some reason they were forced to break contact or were slowed down, they either broke off pursuit or tried to pick another direction from which to approach the guerrilla unit, rather than following directly in their path. In response to this, the FMLN developed a counter-measure. Rather than be forced to lay minefields on the run, guerrilla

units would automatically set up minefields along likely routes of retreat. If they were pursued, they would attempt to lead the army unit through one of these minefields. The guerrillas would pick out predetermined paths through these minefields and walk right through them without stopping. A pursuing army unit that observed the guerrillas moving through that terrain without pause would confidently follow after them and blunder into the mines.

Another common method was for the FMLN to set up an ambush or fighting position and then set up mines, not in the kill zone but along likely escape routes. When an army unit came into the ambush zone, fire would be directed at the enemy to cut off all its routes of escape, except into the minefield. The idea was to tempt or force the army unit into this zone and inflict further casualties. If the unit was hit badly enough, the guerrillas could maneuver and attempt to annihilate the trapped army unit.

More damaging to the armed forces were the permanent minefields. An army unit moving into the areas of guerrilla persistence could expect any place that it could use for rest, shade, water, and protection to be mined. In addition, any likely routes of approach to a guerrilla camp or unit location were also usually mined.

The FMLN mined virtually every road, path, and trail in the zones of conflict. Usually these mines were laid in a zigzag pattern down the center of the way. Trails were often mined where there was low vegetation that aided in the concealment of trip wires and pressure plates. The army suffered more casualties from mines in these areas than from any other type of permanent minefield.

The FMLN used mines designed primarily to wound and maim rather than kill the unlucky victim. In Western military jargon this type of mine is known as a "toe popper." The rationale behind the toe popper is that a force loses more men taking care of wounded men than dead men. The common calculation is that for every wounded man, a force loses two more to aid and assist him, while if a man is killed, he is the only loss to that force. Simply put, a wounded man is a greater liability to a military force than a dead man. The different types of toe poppers in the FMLN inventory could be activated by pressure application, pressure release, or trip wire. Another favorite type of mine used on roads, trails, and paths were fan mines activated by an electrical circuit. Like factory-made claymores, these could be set up to be remotely detonated.

Some of the favorite places along roads, paths, and trails for the FMLN to mine were swinging gates and forced passages. In the zones of conflict there were many abandoned pastures and roads with swinging cattle gates. Mines were usually located at these gates. The mines were planted to one side and activated by pressure plate or trip wire.

Because of the mountainous terrain in Chalatenango, there were many

places where only one route of movement was possible. These were usually deep ravines. An army force had no choice but to use them, and there were almost always mines in these areas. Since these areas were boxed in, the effect of shrapnel was murderous. Here the objective of the FMLN was not merely to wound but to kill as many soldiers as possible with one blast. Because of this, the most commonly used mines were fan mines activated by a trip wire.

In addition to the roads and paths, the FMLN usually mined topographical crests. In fighting on uneven ground, these terrain features were the most critical points. Both the guerrillas and the army used these terrain features for observation, bases of fire, and defensive strong points. During an army offensive, the guerrillas would often set up strong points on elevated terrain to hold up an army advance for a short period of time, to give the main body of guerrillas time to retreat from the area. As a general rule, the army could expect that all of the topographical crests would be mined, especially those with fighting positions already set up on their slopes.

The abandoned fighting positions themselves were ideal places for mining. The FMLN knew that troops would take cover in the old fighting positions, either as a result of being fired on or as a routine security measure during a halt, or for the purpose of setting up camp for the night. The mine was usually buried in the bottom of the position near the rock parapet, activated by pressure plate.

In addition to mining old positions, the FMLN also left booby trapped war souvenirs. These were usually rifles or radios filled with explosives and attached to a trip wire. These explosive souvenirs were left in areas where they would be easy to find. The FMLN used this tactic frequently on Guazapa Mountain.

Abandoned hamlets in the zones of conflict were turned into guerrilla camps. These usually had large numbers of fruit trees, such as mango trees. Mines were planted at the foot of these trees, usually activated by stepping on a pressure plate. The paths and trails around the fruit trees were also mined.

Shade trees, where troops rested and ate their meals, were also constantly mined. These were usually too much of a temptation for tired, hot troops to resist, and there were constantly casualties from mines in these areas. The guerrillas marked the trees by peeling off bark, lining up rocks or breaking small branches. These signs indicated that the area contained a permanent minefield.

Water sources, such as natural springs and man-made wells located in the abandoned hamlets, were almost always mined. The FMLN knew that water was a necessity that soldiers could not do without. During summertime, water sources were mined more heavily than in the winter. Pressure activated mines were the most commonly used in these areas.

Sometimes mines were placed on big rocks, usually found near water sources, because the guerrillas knew that the soldiers sat on the rocks around the water source to rest.

FMLN GUIDELINES FOR DETECTING PRAL UNITS IN THEIR SECTOR OF RESPONSIBILITY

In response to increasing FMLN security measures and caution, the army developed special reconnaissance units commonly known by the acronym PRAL ("Patrulla de Reconocimiento de Alcance Largo," long-range reconnaissance patrols). Each brigade and most of the detachments had PRAL companies. In addition, PRAL units were set up in the air force, the cavalry and artillery regiments, the engineering detachment, most of the immediate reaction battalions and the navy. While the first PRAL units were originally trained by American special forces Vietnam veterans, they soon developed their own techniques and tactics according to the special circumstances unique to El Salvador, and according to the needs of each brigade or detachment. While there were general guidelines, each PRAL unit developed its own unique tactics and characteristics. PRAL units were highly successful, and played a key role in forcing the FMLN to abandon maneuver and large-unit warfare and return to guerrilla tactics and attrition. They were such a thorn in the guerrillas' side that the FMLN developed special defensive tactics specifically to counter the PRAL. The FMLN felt that the key factor to counter PRAL units were the masses and the militias. Masses and militias were instructed to aggressively patrol, search out, and locate PRAL units so they could be destroyed.

The local guerrilla units were to teach the masses about the role and tactics of the PRAL. The PRAL tried to penetrate the FMLN zones of control, often by dressing up as guerrillas or as civilians, or as traveling merchants. The masses were to immediately report any strangers, and actively search their areas for tracks and other signs of strange movement. It was vital that any new information be passed to the guerrillas in time to act, so local guerrillas were charged with maintaining constant contact with their local masses.

Once a PRAL unit was discovered, the militias were to immediately begin to attack and harass the PRAL unit. This was largely done by conducting harassing attacks during the day (taking potshots from a distance) and setting up numerous ambushes at night. Since PRAL units moved mostly at night, the ambushes would immobilize the PRAL. This would impede the PRAL mission and allow regular units to concentrate for an attack. During these harassing attacks and ambushes, the militias were instructed to make heavy use of fan mines, contact bombs, rifles, rifle grenades, ramps, and so on. The use of these weapons ensured maximum

damage to the PRAL, while allowing the militias to inflict this damage from a fairly safe range without the risk of suffering heavy casualties.

Meanwhile, as the information moved up to higher echelons, the area command would establish a curfew on a frontwide or zonewide level, and strictly enforce it, especially in the area where the PRAL unit had been located. The intent was to restrict all civilian movement for a period of time and facilitate only the movement of combat units (militias, local guerrillas, or mobile forces) on the search and destroy mission. Since the FMLN thought the PRAL often disguised themselves as civilians, the restriction of movement was thought to help flush out the PRAL unit.

Once the curfew was established, the measure was immediately communicated to the masses by the quickest means possible. A special recognition signal was devised to facilitate the identification of FMLN units from PRAL teams (the PRAL units often dressed up and acted like FMLN guerrillas). Since PRAL units moved mostly at night, the FMLN had to move at night and there had to be a high degree of coordination between the militias, guerrillas, and all other units in the area. In addition, the zone command needed to inform neighboring zones of the measures that had been taken to avoid accidents and prepare them to take up the chase if the PRAL unit crossed into their area.

The zone commander and guerrilla units were instructed to carefully study the terrain and look for the likely places that PRAL units might use. These areas were to be mined at night and have ambushes set up on the key routes and terrain features. Depending on the situation, ambushes could be maintained night and day until the emergency was over. Hilltops and elevations were to be especially watched and mined because, since the primary mission of PRAL units was reconnaissance, they were forced to use these terrain features to observe and detect guerrilla positions. Since these were also key terrain features for the guerrillas, mines were only used on these features when the presence of a PRAL unit was confirmed, and they were withdrawn immediately after the unit had either left or been destroyed. Another measure was to set up barricades and obstacles along roads, paths, and so on, that led into the depths of the FMLN zones of influence. The objective was to make PRAL movement along these routes difficult, especially at night. These obstacles were usually set up in combination with mines. Meanwhile, the masses, militias, and guerrilla units were to sweep their areas and attempt to flush the PRAL units out.²¹ While the FMLN used these tactics successfully against some PRAL units, other PRAL units developed counter-tactics and continued to cause much of the greatest damage to FMLN units.

The following experience from 1988 illustrates the implementation of these tactics by the FMLN.

First Week of September 1988

During Operation Perquin I, the Domingo Monterrosa Eastern Commandos of the 3rd Brigade were given the mission to penetrate the strategic rearguard of the FMLN. The mission of the Eastern Commandos was to conduct reconnaissance, ambushes, and bring fire down on FMLN targets along the territory between Perquin and Honduras. Because their mission was largely combat, the commandos were organized into three patrols of 30 men each. Each patrol was divided into three groups of ten-man sections, each carrying M-60 machine guns, M-16 rifles, M-203 grenade launchers, and LAW anti-tank rockets. The patrols were to avoid all contact with the civilian population, which in this area mostly supported the FMLN and could not be trusted. The experience had been that most of the information gleaned by the army from the civilians in this zone was false, given with the intent to mislead and deceive. Many of the civilians were suspected of being FMLN militia at night and peasant farmers and laborers during the day. The mission was to attempt to conduct surprise attacks on guerrilla targets of opportunity, command posts, logistical bases, and so on.

The commando company was airlifted into disputed territory claimed by Honduras. The 3rd Brigade commander, Colonel Rene Emilio Ponce, contacted the Honduran 10th Battalion, which agreed to tolerate the presence of Salvadoran troops in the demilitarized disputed zone. From here, the commandos then returned to confirmed Salvadoran territory near Perquin. Since army operations usually penetrated from the south and west, the purpose of approaching from the north was to give the commandos tactical surprise over the guerrilla forces. The guerrillas would expect penetration from the south rather than from the north. To further mask their presence, initial insertion and movement took place at night. However, within a short time the first of the three patrols was detected by guerrilla civilian sympathizers, and within a few hours harassment began with short, sharp encounters with squad-size elements of guerrilla militias who attempted to shadow the first patrol and push it toward stronger guerrilla forces in ambush positions. The militia attacks consisted primarily of sniper fire and the firing of ramps and homemade rifle grenades. The patrol avoided all trails and paths and tried to evade its pursuers. It managed to avoid the trap and establish a good defensive position on high ground, on the slope of Cerro Gigante. However, soon after the commandos reached the hill, they were practically surrounded by strategic mobile force guerrillas who hunkered down and began waiting for them to run out of ammunition before they moved in to make the kill. The only alternative was to hunker down and call for support. Unfortunately, the weather was overcast, with heavy rain. The patrol was told that helicopters couldn't fly to its position on the side of a mountain in bad weather, and the only available units to relieve pressure on the first patrol were the other two commando patrols. The other two patrols received orders to relieve the first, and immediately began to march to relieve their besieged comrades. Although they were two or three days' travel away, they immediately ran into guerrilla militia squads who began to harass these patrols in a similar manner to the first patrol.



A battery of captured FMLN ramps like those used against the Eastern commandos.

The FMLN had sounded the alarm and guerrilla forces were out looking for them. The second patrol changed directions several times during the night and managed to evade the militia probes. They reached Llano del Muerto, a flat plain near Perquin, and set up a night position. Here helicopters could fly in, and in the morning they received a resupply drop by helicopter and then resumed their march the next morning. If they had remained undetected before, the arrival of the helicopter stacked the odds against remaining hidden. Not wanting to be attacked, the commandos immediately moved out. From Llano Muerto the second patrol marched under heavy rain to Cerro La Crucita and then crossed Rio Negro to Ojo de Agua. It avoided all trails, paths, and other positions that might be mined or ambushed. However, as the advanced element of ten men reached the top of a hill they were greeted with a volley of fire from FAL, G-3, and Galil rifles. They responded with concentrated fire on full automatic with M-16 rifles and M-60 machine guns. After a half hour of intense fire, the commandos decided that more heavy firepower was needed, and a commando fired a LAW disposable rocket launcher, after which the guerrillas withdrew. The patrol then took over the ambush position of the guerrillas, which consisted of shallow trenches reinforced with rock walls. Under the cover of fog, the commandos set up a perimeter. After taking care of security, they ate a meal consisting of canned food and cold coffee. During the night they expected an attack, but it did not materialize.

The next day, the second patrol moved out toward the village of El Carrizal and linked up with the third patrol, which had experienced its own problems getting this far. At dusk the third commando patrol occupied the hill next to the village. Shortly after it set up a perimeter, it was probed by small guerrilla elements attempting to determine the exact nature and layout of the third patrol position. The guerrillas worked their way forward until they surrounded the third patrol with what was estimated to be a reinforced platoon of regular strategic mobile force guerrillas. A fierce battle began as the guerrillas attempted to annihilate the third patrol. The second patrol was requested to rescue the third patrol in the dark, rain, and fog. Using night vision goggles the commandos slowly advanced toward their besieged comrades and attempted to break the ring of guerrilla fighters around the third patrol. The fighting was fierce. After four hours of skirmishing, the night vision goggle batteries ran out and the rescue attempt appeared to have bogged down. However, the guerrillas suddenly withdrew, permitting the second patrol to reach the third and reinforce the perimeter. With the third patrol, the second remained at full alert throughout the night, expecting a stronger guerrilla assault at any time. Again, no attack materialized, and the next morning the dawn broke with a clear sky, permitting air support. The commandos were faced with two decisions: continue the mission or be extracted. Having suffered no disabling casualties, they decided to continue the mission. However, they developed a plan to fool the guerrillas by conducting a fake extraction. The surrounded platoon on Cerro Gigante would be evacuated by a combined helicopter and attack plane force. Spotter planes flew over, and with the aid of the besieged commandos marked the guerrilla positions, which were then immediately attacked by A-37 Dragonflies. While the Dragonflies were keeping the guerrillas occupied, UH-1 helicopters swooped in and extracted the besieged first platoon. Meanwhile, at El Carrizal,

a similar situation developed. An O-2 observation plane flew over the soldiers' position; guided by the commandos on the ground it marked suspected guerrilla positions around the hill next to El Carrizal. Shortly thereafter a flight of two A-37s conducted a long bombardment of the guerrilla positions. Meanwhile, a flight of helicopters arrived, acting as if they were evacuating troops. However, only a few commandos boarded the helicopters which mostly unloaded supplies for continued commando operations. As the A-37s continued their terrific bombardment, the remainder of the patrols slipped through the guerrilla ring to attempt a deeper penetration of the FMLN zone to continue the mission.²²

FMLN SECURITY MEASURES

Setting Up Camps

The base camps were the basic support unit of the FMLN for all guerrilla activities, such as operations, development, training, and indoctrination. The FMLN had developed a sophisticated and complex set of criteria for the establishment and development of camps on the war front, depending on the level of unit within the camp. The FMLN categorized each camp as either permanent, semipermanent, or mobile.

Permanent camps were those used by the high command and special forces and would remain in a single location for one to two months. They were located in what the FMLN called the strategic rearguard in Morazan and northern Chalatenango.

Semipermanent camps were those used by regional commands and would remain fixed for one to two weeks. They were located in the most critical areas within the region.

Mobile camps were established by units such as the mobile forces (regular units) and the local guerrilla units. These camps were set up for four to seven days. The mobile camps were located on the periphery of the guerrilla zones of control.

The key element for the security of all camps was to keep their locations secret. The FMLN learned through experience that the greatest secrecy had to be maintained around the permanent camps of the high command. The higher up the chain of command the occupants were, the more security measures had to be taken to protect the camp. The army constantly sought to attack the FMLN high command, because it reasoned that if it could decapitate the guerrilla organization, the FMLN would quickly unravel. Some of the security measures were as follows.

On any given front, each type of FMLN force had four or five preselected areas where they routinely set up camps. These areas were chosen on the basis of the following criteria: sufficient water, sufficient vegetation for cover, presence of high ground suitable for communications and observation, adequate routes of retreat (such as stream beds), the absence

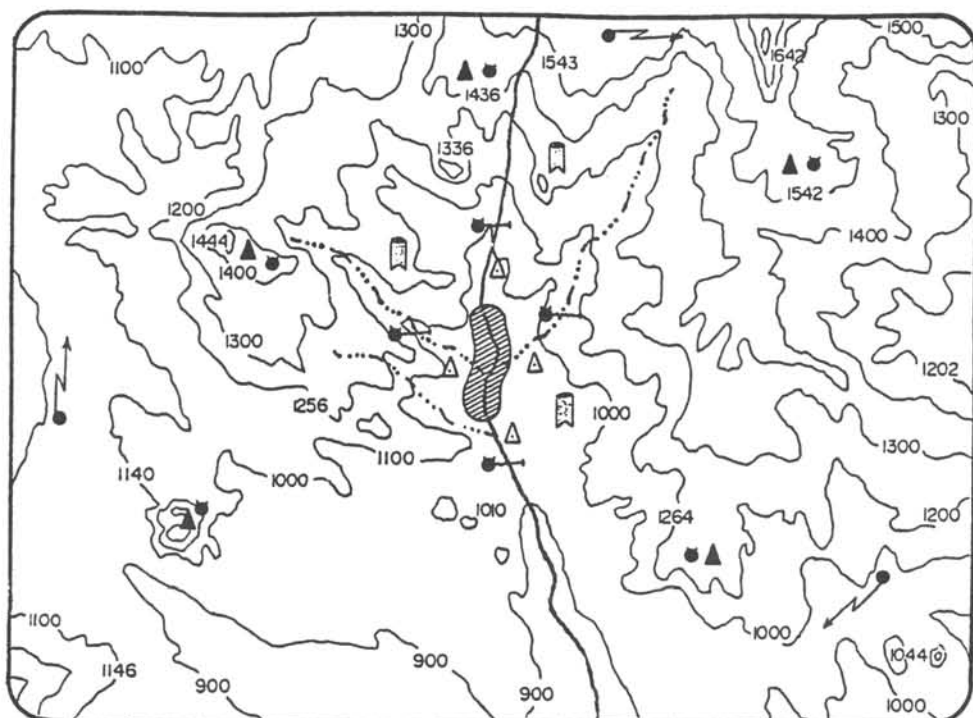
of civilian population, and lack of roads or major trails. The guerrilla units would move from area to area, depending on the actions of the armed forces. During one year they might set up camp two or three times at the same site. If there was no army activity in the camp area, the guerrilla units would still move according to their internal security regulations. Quiet times were often periods in which the army conducted reconnaissance for new attacks, and complacency often resulted in heavy losses (see Figure 7). For camp security, each camp was supposed to take both active and passive measures. The active measures included the use of sentries.










Sentries or lookouts were the most common active measure, and were located at a prudent distance of at least one hundred meters from the main body of the camp during daylight hours. During the night, the sentries were brought in to within 25 meters of the camp. Their primary function was to impede an enemy force from entering the camp until the rest of the camp could be evacuated. In other words, they were to act as an early warning and a rear guard. They were under strict orders not to leave their positions for any reason. Punishment was usually severe, often death. The sentries were supervised by a commander of the guard who established the sign and counter-sign, and assigned the reliefs and sent them out. The commander of the guard's position was inside the camp.

A second common active measure was for the FMLN to set up observation posts. Observation posts (OPs) were located 300 to 500 meters from the camp, depending upon the distance at which the highest elevation was located near the camp. Their mission was to detect suspicious aerial or ground movements and immediately advise the camp commander. Normally, OPs were set up in pairs and the occupants were under strict orders not to fire their weapons and give away their position. This would let the enemy know that a camp was nearby.

Another common measure was the use of patrols. Patrols were normally carried out in the first hours of the morning and just before dusk. The patrols would circle the region around the camp to detect prints or signs that indicated the proximity of an enemy force. Patrols consisted of four or five guerrillas carrying a radio to communicate any observed sign. Patrols usually started with a search of the surrounding elevations around the camp, as these were the most likely jumping-off points for attacks or locations for army reconnaissance elements. The patrols would then search the stream beds to look for signs such as moved rocks, boot prints in the sand, or wet boot prints on the rocks. They then searched the trails and roads to look for signs that indicated the presence of troops. If there were hamlets in the vicinity, the patrols would approach the inhabitants and ask them questions. The FMLN considered the information given by the civilians to be very important, and depended a great deal on its sympathizers.

Figure 7
Diagram of an FMLN Camp and Its Security Elements



-  Anti-helicopter mine
-  Sentries
-  Observation Post
-  Perimeter Patrol
-  Trip wire activated mines
-  Pressure activated mines
-  Camp
-  River
-  Stream

As the war developed, the FMLN increasingly used mines to protect its camps. At night the guerrillas would set up temporary mines in places most likely to be used by the enemy as routes of incursion, such as creeks, stream beds, and elevations. Mines activated by trip wire were found to be very useful along stream beds. In addition, the FMLN set up permanent minefields around its camps. These included mining places such as water holes, fruit trees, shade trees, little-used roads and trails, abandoned fighting positions (on elevations), abandoned houses, cross-roads, or trail forks. The guidelines were to mine any place that army troops were likely to move through, investigate, or use for rest. Every two weeks a team would be sent to carry out what the FMLN called a "mine relief." This consisted of replacing the batteries and upgrading weather-proofing.

Another type of mine that was developed to protect camps was the trabuco. It was designed as a measure to impede aerial recon and consisted of a tube about three feet long, ten inches in diameter, filled with amatol and shards of metal. It essentially operated on the same principle as the claymore mine. It was placed in the tops of shade trees with the business end aimed skyward. Preferably, the trees were located on the slopes of nearby hills. The trabuco was fired remotely by electric cable and was set off when a helicopter passed over the device. The weapon was devised to counter recon helicopters flying nap of the earth.

Secure communications was also an important element to FMLN camps. One measure was to monitor enemy communications. The FMLN had specially trained personnel who used captured PRC-77 radios to monitor army communications. They were trained to frequency hop until they located enemy communications, and then to listen in. Some army units were not very adept at maintaining strict communications security, and the FMLN was frequently able to break into the net and monitor what the army was doing. Along with the sentries, these code breakers acted as early warnings of army attacks. However, in addition, the FMLN radio monitors would often enter the net masquerading as an army unit or command element and attempt to misdirect army units, air strikes, and artillery missions. While the army was usually able to distinguish between friend and foe, sometimes the enemy was successful (see the example of the Campana Hill battle).

Passive Measures

The FMLN also developed a series of passive measures that were strictly enforced to avoid enemy detection of camps. These included avoiding hanging clothes to dry in the open and camouflaging huts with fresh vegetation. The vegetation was to be changed every day, and paths were to be camouflaged in a similar manner. They avoided emitting smoke (by

using the Vietnamese oven) and were to avoid creating noise with radios, cassette players, and so on. They also avoided cutting down or trimming trees near the camp, loading beasts of burden such as horses or mules in the open, lighting lamps and fires at night, the use of white clothing, smoking, and the use of lotions or deodorants.

The Vietnamese oven was a very useful device for passive security and was set up to avoid smoke within the camps. Essentially, it consisted of an underground stove, the smoke from which was channeled through a long underground cavity at the end of which was an opening covered by a burlap sack or sandbag covered with earth. The sack was kept wet at all times to absorb the smoke. This ingenious device greatly reduced the chance of being detected, as it nearly eliminated all visible smoke. Normally these ovens were located near the water supply and among dense vegetation.²³

FMLN COMMUNICATIONS

The FMLN regarded electronic military communications as highly important to its struggle. Radio was useful to spread the guerrilla political message to a broad audience and to facilitate rapid and timely instructions during battle. Radio communications were assigned such great importance that the FMLN felt it was impossible to effectively conduct the tasks of a unit, zone, or front without this form of communication.²⁴

The FMLN found that when there was a loss of communications there was a loss of command during combat. If the guerrillas lost radio communication they were forced to use runners, and although the role of a runner was glamorized in guerrilla propaganda, the FMLN found communication by runner to be extremely slow and unreliable. Where the enemy possessed radio communication and means to rapidly maneuver in combat, the FMLN found that it could not afford to be without rapid communication of its own and expect to survive. For the FMLN, radio communication was a strategic tool of the revolution.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE GUARANTEE OF COMMUNICATIONS OPERABILITY

The FMLN developed very strict guidelines for the use of radio communications, and security measures that each guerrilla commander had to enforce. First, the leaders and radio operators had to always be together. One of the side effects of this was that in the ranks of the FMLN there was a large proportion of women combatants who served as radio operators. Having young girls as radio operators often led to the radio operator serving a double function as the column or camp commander's mistress. Radio equipment and batteries had to be constantly checked,

especially before and after a military operation. Radio equipment was only to be used for necessary communication. Radio nets were not to be jammed with personal conversations, unnecessary chatter, and so on. Since batteries were relatively difficult to obtain, the energy supply was to be conserved. This measure tied in neatly with the previous guideline. Another measure to conserve energy was to avoid making too many calls. If a unit had not responded on the second or third attempt made to contact it, no more attempts were made unless it was an emergency. Not only did this conserve energy, it also avoided detection by government radio-finding equipment. To avoid the irritation of making repeated attempts at locating units, every unit or patrol was assigned the task of constantly checking its position to avoid losing communication with its neighboring or parent unit.²⁵

Radio Operator Security Measures

Radio operators were trained to always transmit certain items in code. This included movements of one's own unit, the location, tactical and strategic plans, force structure, capabilities, activities, or problems. If possible they were to avoid transmitting this information at all, whether in code or not. Only guerrilla leaders and designated and trained operators were allowed to use the devices. Guerrilla operators were trained to never abandon the radio or the codes, and to always carry them with them. Radios were to be regarded as more important than personal weapons.

Ciphered or deciphered messages were to be destroyed immediately by fire after use. Under no circumstances were the papers they were recorded on to be buried, thrown away, or used for any other purpose, such as for toilet paper. No one in the radio and command unit was to be allowed near the designated radio post. Unauthorized persons who insisted on hanging around were dealt with harshly. Radio posts were located away from the roads and places of transit where they could be seen by personnel from other areas. This was to avoid detection by army PRAL teams dressed as guerrillas. The PRAL teams were bound to call artillery or air support and have the radio post attacked.

Radio operators were sworn to secrecy and told not to discuss their jobs with anyone, especially concerning the contents of messages or the operational situation during their times on duty. If the radio operator lost a code book in combat, the loss was to be immediately reported. During a planned attack, it was standard practice for the FMLN to clear the net of all communications so that the frequencies could be open for emergency and contingency transmissions only. If enemy aircraft were sighted, transmissions would cease. Operators were trained to know that if another operator suddenly ceased transmission on the net, it was due



Guerrillas attacking a suburb of San Salvador in January 1982. By this date the guerrillas were already making widespread use of hand-held radios, which were lighter and more efficient than the models used by the Salvadoran army. Note also the M-16, FN FAL, and roll of det cord being used.

to the presence of enemy aircraft, and they too should automatically cease transmission and pick up when the aircraft were gone.²⁶

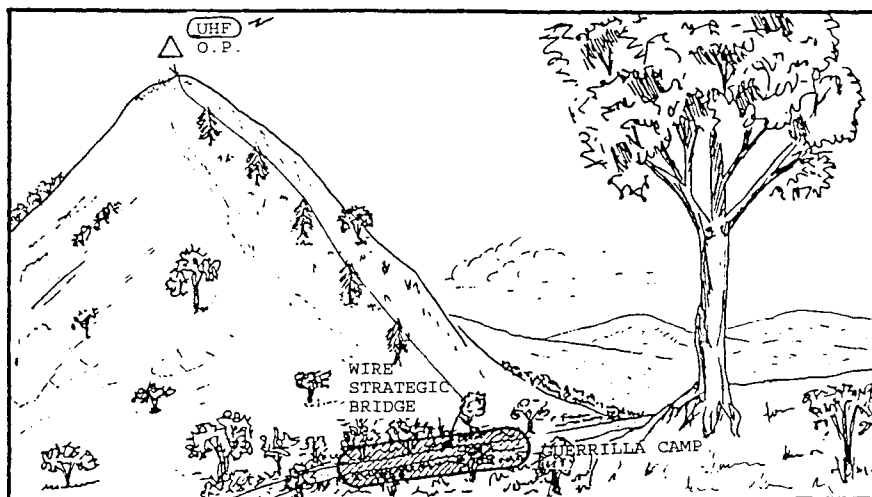
TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

FMLN radio communications were conducted in code, and on a two-meter band. Most communications in tactical, mobile situations were conducted in this manner. Because tactical units of the FMLN were constantly on the move, this was desirable since either the armed forces already knew where the FMLN was, or the guerrilla units were not in the area long enough for the armed forces to get a fix on the communications net and strike the location with airpower, artillery, or airmobile troops.

The FMLN found that it required more sophisticated methods to protect the more permanent base camps in the rear areas along the border with Honduras. The term for the FMLN technique was known as the "strategic bridge." Essentially, what the strategic bridge did was make a radio transmission made from a secret base camp appear as if it was made from a location up to several kilometers away. Explicit guidelines were developed for the establishment of headquarters camps. Command camps were first located in places with heavy vegetation, such as hollows or depressions in the terrain. These were not likely places for camps, because natural communication with other forces dispersed through the area would be difficult due to a lack of direct line of sight between the equipment. The FMLN developed a method where it ran a long wire from the communications equipment of the headquarters camp to an observation/radio post on a convenient hill or mountain (see Figure 8). Usually, the observation post would be located on the most dominant elevation around the camp. This wire bridge or strategic bridge might be located as far as three kilometers from the camp, a distance that offered a high margin of security. Airmobile units attacking the point of transmission would find nothing but a small observation post to attack. Meanwhile, the attack on the observation post would give the headquarters camp ample warning to be able to relocate to a safer position.

Essentially, the way the strategic bridge worked was that communications from the base camp would be transmitted by wire to the observation post in open text, and here the messages would be converted into code and retransmitted by wireless. The armed forces were fooled for several months until they discovered one of the wires and followed it for several kilometers to the evacuated base camp. After discovering the method, the armed forces were able to mount attacks based on deductive reasoning. In 1986, they knocked out a major FPL communications center in Chalatenango, and several other successful attacks were mounted against formerly secure FMLN command camps.

Figure 8
Diagram of the Strategic Bridge



NOTES

1. FMLN, *Combate Contra los Medios Aéreos* (El Salvador: Publicaciones FMLN, 1987).
2. Army statistics viewed by the author in 1990, courtesy Salvadoran S-2.
3. ERP-BRAZ, *El Combate Contra Medios Aéreos del Enemigo*. El Salvador (Morazan, El Salvador: Escuela Militar de la Brigada Rafael Arce Zablah [BRAZ], 1985).
4. FPL, *Combate Anti-Aéreo No. 5* (Chalatenango, El Salvador: Centro de Impresiones Revolucionarias, July 1986), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.
5. ERP-BRAZ, *El Combate Contra Medios Aéreos del Enemigo*.
6. ERP-BRAZ, *El Combate Contra Medios Aéreos del Enemigo*.
7. ERP-BRAZ, *El Combate Contra Medios Aéreos del Enemigo*.
8. ERP-BRAZ, *El Combate Contra Medios Aéreos del Enemigo*.
9. FPL, *Principales Experiencias Operativas de la D.A. #2 del Año 1985* (San Vicente, El Salvador: Ediciones Chinchontepec Heroico, 1986).
10. FPL, *Experiencias de Conducción Para la Defensa Anti-Aérea* (Chalatenango, El Salvador: Centro de Impresiones Revolucionarias, 1985), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.
11. FMLN, *Flecha: Destruyendo sus Medios Aéreos* (El Salvador, n.d.), captured from guerrillas in 1989.
12. Nidia Diaz, *Nidia Diaz Documents*. Nidia Diaz's entire archive of personal manuscript documents was captured with her in April 1985.
13. FMLN, *La Guerra Revolucionara del Pueblo* (El Salvador: Publicaciones FMLN, 1987), captured from guerrillas in 1989.
14. FMLN, *Manual de Armamento Casero* (El Salvador, n.d.), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

15. Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia, *Cobete CCI* (El Salvador, 1989). Intelligence document on homemade FMLN anti-aircraft weapon.
16. FMLN, *Guía del Combatiente: Uso Combativo de las Minas* (El Salvador: Publicaciones FMLN, 1987), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.
17. FPL, *Principales Experiencias Operativas de la D.A. #2 del Año 1985*.
18. Cancillería de El Salvador, *Informe Sobre Las Minas*, Gobierno de El Salvador, 1987.
19. FMLN, *Guía del Combatiente: Uso Combativo de las Minas*.
20. Capt. A. Longoria, USMC et al., *Low Intensity Conflict from an Infantryman's Perspective* (Quantico, Virginia, 1988). Unpublished manuscript written by USMC officers who had just returned to the United States after tours in El Salvador as advisers.
21. FMLN, *Lineamientos para Detectar Unidades PRAL en los Sectores de Responsabilidad* (El Salvador, n.d.), captured by a PRAL unit in 1988.
22. Account based on an interview with one of the members of the second patrol, March 1990.
23. Based on interviews with a former guerrilla base commander, March 1990.
24. Interview with a guerrilla commander who defected to the government side in early 1990, San Salvador, July 1992.
25. FMLN, *Lineamientos para la Garantía de las Comunicaciones Operacionales* (El Salvador, n.d.), captured from guerrillas in 1988.
26. FMLN, *Las Comunicaciones: Lineamientos para los Radiooperadores* (El Salvador, 1987), captured from guerrillas at unknown date.

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Guerrilla Logistics/Support/ Sanctuary

Debate has raged in political circles and in the media over the extent of foreign aid and money received by the FMLN during the course of the war. The FMLN and its political supporters attempted to make the world believe that most of its weaponry was obtained on the international black market or captured from the Salvadoran military. Between 1970 and 1979, this may have been the case. But for the most part, the FMLN propaganda was a complete myth. While the FMLN did capture several large hauls of weapons from the Salvadoran government, these never amounted to more than enough weapons to arm and sustain perhaps a maximum of five percent of its forces. Arms from the international black market were negligible. There can be no doubt that without the massive assistance, in terms of money, weapons, training, and sanctuary received from Cuba, Nicaragua, and other foreign donors, the FMLN could never have lasted for nearly as long as it did. One of the great successes of the FMLN was that from the very beginning it established an international logistical net that had the capacity and will to supply more weapons and equipment than the FMLN needed. As one Central American commander put it, "Amateurs study strategy, while professionals study logistics."¹ The FMLN followed this maxim religiously, a fact which was largely responsible for its longevity and high level of military development. The FMLN was seldom short of equipment and, during the first years of the war, was often better equipped, supplied, and armed than the government forces. This was because the infrastructure had been developed over a number of years prior to the outbreak of major hostilities.

During the Sandinista revolution, several of the FMLN factions provided money, weapons, and personnel to the Sandinistas for their fight

against Somoza. Immediately after the Sandinista revolution, the Sandinistas reciprocated and supplied the Salvadoran revolutionaries with weapons and personnel, and began to assist the FMLN with its planning of the revolution in El Salvador.²

The Cubans saw the advances of the Salvadoran guerrillas and, in early 1980, stepped in and offered their assistance to the Salvadoran factions on the condition that they would form a unified front. The result of this offer/ultimatum was the creation of the FMLN. Cuban assistance consisted of an already working logistical network which had been used to supply the Sandinistas in 1978 and 1979. The Sandinista network was a joint, covert venture between several important Latin American political leaders. Cuba supplied the bulk of the weapons (mostly remnants of the 1959 Batista arsenal), while Carlos Andres Perez of Venezuela and Omar Torrijos of Panama supplied smaller amounts. The weapons were flown from Cuba and Venezuela to Panama in cargo planes. Routing through Panama or other nations was done to disguise the origin of the weapons. From Panama they were taken by small plane to the border with Nicaragua in northern Costa Rica. Here the weapons were stored in secret deposits and then taken into Nicaragua.

When the network was opened to the FMLN, Venezuela soon dropped out after the Christian Democrat Napoleon Duarte became the leader of the Salvadoran government. President Carlos Andres Perez, also a Christian Democrat, had given asylum and aid to Duarte while he was part of the opposition. However, when the Salvadoran Christian Democrats became part of the Salvadoran government, the Venezuelans ceased assistance to the Salvadoran rebels and provided military aid to the government. Yet, a significant number of Venezuelan weapons were delivered to the FMLN, largely those that were already in the pipeline at the time the Sandinistas overthrew Somoza. After 1980, Venezuelan weapons were no longer sent.

Still, Panama and elements in Costa Rica still cooperated. In 1980, a Costa Rican civilian plane was intercepted and shot down and the Costa Rican pilot captured by the Salvadoran army. In that same year, two Panamanian military planes crashed and were captured, loaded with weapons for the FMLN. However, as time went on, enthusiasm for the FMLN in Costa Rica dried up, and when the supplies of weapons were depleted, Costa Rican involvement largely ended. Panama remained a tenuous partner but was supplanted as the bridge between Cuba and El Salvador by Nicaragua. Weapons could be delivered directly to Nicaragua from Cuba, as the Cubans were helping establish the Sandinista army. This eliminated several links in the chain, and it cost less and guaranteed greater security. From Nicaragua weapons could be easily taken to El Salvador by land, air, and sea. The main disadvantage was that Cuba did not possess an unlimited arsenal and could not sustain the effort indefinitely. Further-

more, Cuba had made commitments to other subversive groups such as those of Chile, Colombia, and Guatemala. Unless the FMLN could obtain other sources of weapons, the flow would soon be reduced to a trickle.

The problem was not one of weapons *per se*. Cuba had a massive arsenal of Soviet-bloc weapons, but if these were turned over to the FMLN it would give an open invitation to the United States to intervene. One of the reasons the Sandinista revolution against Somoza had been successful was that the Marxist nature of the Sandinistas, and their supply of weapons from Communist countries, had remained hidden from public view. The Sandinistas were always able to put up a plausibly deniable story to cover their tracks, and as long as there was a plausible doubt, the United States could not drum up enough public or international support for active intervention. Quite to the contrary. Some other Western nations even extended political recognition to the rebels, and in the end, the United States also withdrew its support of Somoza. The FMLN needed to repeat the success of the Sandinistas and find sources of Western-made weapons.

Prior to the 1981 offensive, the FMLN sent Farid Handal, the brother of Shafik Handal, leader of the Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS) on a world tour to solicit funds for the coming battle. Farid visited the United States, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, East Germany, Algeria, Libya, Ethiopia, and Vietnam. From each of these nations he secured promises of military and financial aid. The Soviets promised the FMLN that it would deliver the aid to Cuba on regular Russian cargo ships. Cuba would then distribute the aid through the established network to the Salvadoran guerrillas.³ According to a captured guerrilla document, by November 1980 there were up to 400 tons of weapons located in warehouses in Cuba, while there were up to 150 tons in Nicaragua.⁴ Even counting that half of this tonnage consisted of ammunition (generous because the FMLN was always short), and that the average weapon weighed ten kilos, this would mean that the FMLN had been able to amass, through foreign support, over 27,000 weapons. This did not include weapons that had already reached El Salvador. The main problem for the FMLN was not obtaining weapons, it was shipping them into El Salvador.

Essentially, there were three routes: by land across Honduras, by sea across the Gulf of Fonseca, and by air to landing strips along the east coast. While the FMLN developed very sophisticated methods for the latter route, the Salvadoran air force was always able to dominate national air space, and consequently many planes, such as the Costa Rican and Panamanian planes, were either shot down or crashed with very embarrassing international results. The favored routes were by land through Honduras or by sea across the Gulf of Fonseca.

During the entire war, Central American commerce continued una-

bated. Products were shipped by semitruck all over the region. The FMLN saw these trucks as the best means of transporting arms to El Salvador. False compartments were built in the floors, walls, and ceilings of the trucks. This took place in special shops run by the Sandinistas in Managua. These trucks would either drive right into El Salvador and unload their cargo, or more often would unload the weapons along the border with Honduras.⁵ The Salvadoran customs agents were more alert than the Hondurans and made several important discoveries. The Hondurans were less alert, although they too did make some discoveries of large numbers of weapons. However, some Honduran customs agents could be bought off or bribed to look the other way. Some Hondurans had no love for the Salvadoran government because of lingering animosity over the 1969 Soccer War. The war had ended inconclusively, and both nations had secretly prepared for another war at a later date. Some Honduran police and military officials felt that if they could help perpetuate a long internal war in El Salvador, the Honduran military could catch up, or even gain the advantage over the Salvadorans while the latter were worn down by the internal conflict.

It must be stressed that this was not the attitude of the majority of the Honduran military. As institutions Honduras and El Salvador basically had good relations. But there were some people in Honduras that were willing to look the other way when the FMLN sent weapons through their territory to the guerrilla fronts in El Salvador. As long as the FMLN did not meddle in internal Honduran affairs, the FMLN was tolerated. The majority of the weapons that reached El Salvador probably came through this route. This was especially true of the weapons that were delivered to Morazan and Chalatenango. The guerrilla areas of persistence in Usulután and San Vicente were more commonly supplied by the sea route.

The Sandinistas established some warehouses on the Gulf of Fonseca in which they stored the weapons destined for the FMLN. Weapons were trucked in to these warehouses from Cuban ships landing on the Atlantic coast. The weapons were then shipped to the FMLN. The Sandinistas controlled the operation. At first, the Sandinistas were very unprofessional. They tended to overload boats to the point that some sank during the crossing. They also tended not to be careful about the seaworthiness of the vessels they used.⁶

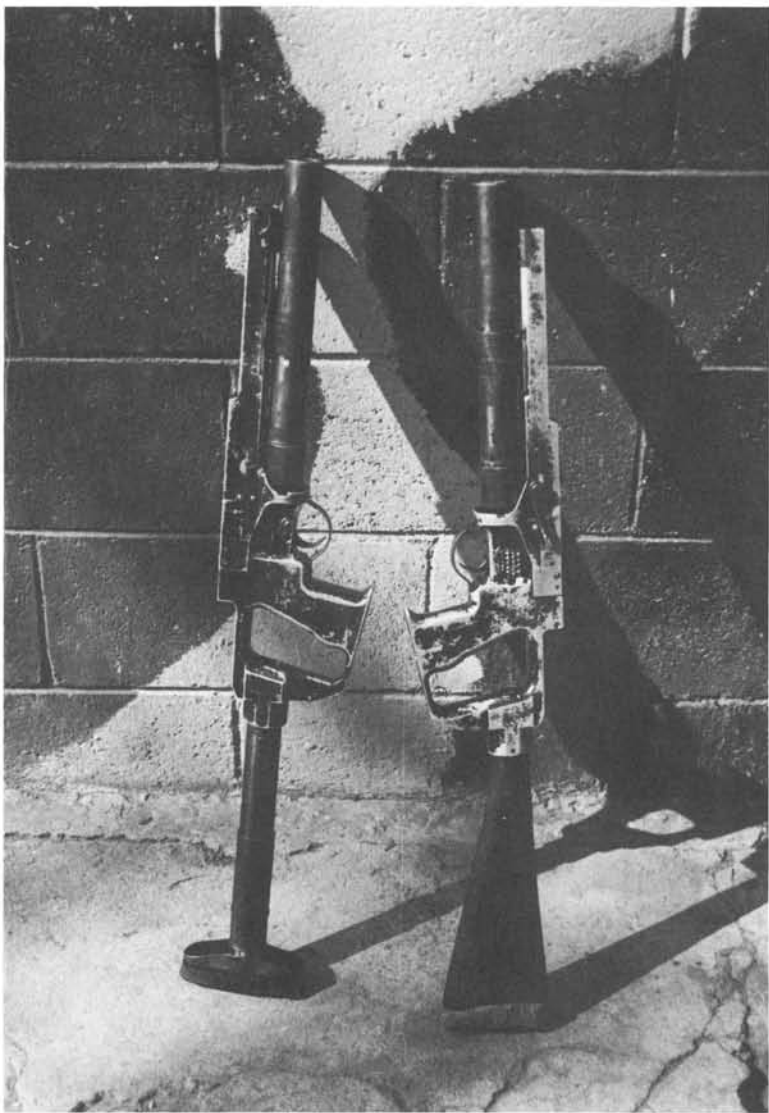
However, as the war went on, the Sandinistas developed more sophisticated methods. El Salvador has a lot of people employed gathering shrimp and lobsters. There were a number of companies that had fleets of trawlers that plied up and down the coasts, including the Gulf of Fonseca. The Sandinistas soon saw the implications and learned that trawlers provided an excellent disguise for their operations. These were supported by speedboats that could move faster than anything owned by the Salvadoran navy. The speedboats were operated by Sandinista combat

swimmers, trained in part by former Argentine Montonero terrorists. Each boat carried an explosive charge that could be detonated to sink the boat in case of potential capture. The swimmers would then make their own way back to Nicaragua.⁷ The speedboats would meet the trawlers out in Nicaraguan waters. Here the arms would be loaded onto the boats and the boats would make their run into the Salvadoran shore. Near shore, the boats would often be met by cayucos (local dugout canoes), and then the canoes would take the weapons to the various points along the shore where they would be met by guerrilla logistics columns with mules or small trucks. A favorite place to deliver the weapons was in the mangrove swamps of Jucuaran. A cayuco could easily evade a pursuer at night in these swamps, and the dense vegetation made it very difficult for any type of pursuit on land into the area. In addition, caches of weapons could be easily stored and hidden in this area for short periods of time. Jucuaran remained a guerrilla stronghold throughout the war.

The most common weapons received through the pipeline were two types of rifles, the FN FAL and the M16/AR15. The FN FALs were mostly from Cuba, leftovers from the Batista and early Castro years. Their distinguishing characteristic was a quarter-size hole cut in the right side of the magazine well. This hole was made to cut out the Cuban coat of arms that had been stamped on the original weapons. What the Cubans forgot was to grind off the serial numbers, so it was fairly easy to contact the manufacturer in Belgium and trace the origin of the weapons.⁸ These Cuban FALs were also delivered to guerrilla groups in Colombia, Chile, Venezuela, and Guatemala.⁹ The M16/AR15s came largely from Vietnam and Nicaragua. These were fairly easy to trace, because the United States had records of which weapons had been lost or left behind in Vietnam, and which had been sold abroad. What is ironic is that the FMLN began using the M16 as an issue weapon a full year before the Salvadoran military received it from the United States. During this time, FMLN guerrillas would show off their M16s to journalists as evidence of U.S. aid to the government, when in fact, the Salvadoran government had still not received a single M16! Another weapon type that was fairly common was the ex-Nicaraguan National Guard Israeli Galil. For support, the FMLN received a fair number of M79 grenade launchers and RPG-2 rocket launchers; the FMLN called the RPG-2 the "Chinese Staff" (Bastón Chino). Heavier weapons such as mortars and machine guns, like the M-60s or FN MAGs, were far fewer in number. The proportion of the heavier weapons became much higher as the FMLN developed large combat units between 1982 and 1985. This included recoilless rifles, 81mm mortars, and a higher proportion of machine guns, including heavier guns such as .30 caliber and .50 caliber Brownings. However, while the FMLN was having a great deal of success bringing in weapons, ammunition was a different story.

The FMLN had expected to capture large quantities of ammunition from the government, so initially it had not bothered to secure large supplies for its forces. However, the captured amounts were never sufficient, especially after the FMLN formed regular combat battalions and brigades. Certain quantities were brought in through the Cuban/Nicaraguan network, but few Communist nations manufactured ammunition for Western-made weapons. Stocks of captured ammunition were low in the Communist countries. The closest and most plentiful source of Western ammunition was the United States. The FMLN began to tap into its support network in the United States to obtain the quantities of Western-made ammunition it needed. While the vast majority of the support networks were innocent Americans who thought they were donating money to refugees, and to stop human rights abuses in Central America, there was a clandestine core of Salvadorans in these organizations who were guerrillas operating in the United States. Their mission was to secretly divert funds for political or humanitarian activities from the support groups and use them to purchase the ammunition, equipment, and trucks to transport them to El Salvador. The trucks and vehicles were modified with secret compartments to ship this hardware South.¹⁰ While this source of weaponry was not as important as that of Cuba and Nicaragua, the support coming from the United States to the FMLN guerrillas was far greater than most people have cared to recognize. The supply of weapons and ammunition from the United States to El Salvador continued through the end of the war.

In 1988 the FMLN decided to completely change and update its arsenal. Starting in January, the armed forces began to capture increasing numbers of AK-47s and variants of the AK-47 family. By the beginning of 1989, the Soviet-designed family of weapons had largely replaced the older, Western-designed weapons. These included AK-47 rifles, Dragunov sniper rifles, RPK and PKM machine guns, RPG-18 and RPG-7 individual anti-tank weapons, and an interesting grenade launcher known to the FMLN as the M26. This weapon resembled an American M203 grenade launcher, but fired the round of the Soviet AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher. In addition, there were rifle and hand grenades, explosives, and all the accompanying paraphernalia. The FMLN commanders claimed that the new weapons had been bought from the recently demobilized Contras (supplied with Soviet-bloc weapons by the United States to be compatible with Sandinista army weapons). However, this argument was so full of holes that only the most ardent FMLN supporters believed it.¹¹ While a small amount of the new FMLN weapons could be traced back to the Contras, these were probably weapons that had been captured from the Contras during the long war in Nicaragua. However, the vast majority of the FMLN weapons were neither of the right type nor manufacture, as were those that were delivered to the



The FMLN's M26 grenade launcher. Both of these are missing the forward hand guard. The one on the left is the M26A2, and the one on the right is the M26A1. The M26 was a partial copy of the U.S. M203 grenade launcher, but fired the Soviet AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher round.

Contras. The Contras never had PKMs, RPG-18s, M-26s or millions of rounds of Cuban ammunition. Before the large hauls captured in El Salvador, Cuban ammunition was so rare that a foremost ammunition expert had paid large sums of money to add a single Cuban shell case to his collection (it had been picked up by accident in the ballast of a cargo ship). The Contras' AK-47s had largely been of Chinese, Romanian, or Polish manufacture, while the FMLN's weapons were of Soviet, East German, North Korean, and Yugoslavian manufacture. There was little connection between the Contras' weapons and those of the FMLN.

One of the most important weapons introduced during the 1989 offensive was the surface-to-air missile. Since the early 1980s, the FMLN had been asking for some type of missile to knock down the Salvadoran air force combat aircraft. The Salvadoran military had developed very effective airmobile and ground attack tactics, and inflicted high casualties on the brigade- and battalion-size units of the FMLN. In the mid-1980s, documents were captured from the FMLN indicating that it was conducting training on the use of this type of weapon. However, due to political and military pressures on Nicaragua and Cuba, ground-to-air missiles were not delivered to the FMLN until 1989. During the "Until the Limit" offensive of that year, the Sandinistas finally flew in quantities of these SA-7 Strella, and American-made Redeye missiles (captured from the Contras). Perhaps for lack of training, the initial combat use of these weapons did not meet expectations. Some planes were damaged, but none knocked down. However, over time, the FMLN began to develop greater proficiency and managed to knock down a number of aircraft. When the FMLN received SA-14s, the situation became even more serious. Many thought that with the fall of the Soviet Union and the ousting of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua through popular vote, aid to the FMLN would greatly diminish. However, weapons and supplies continued to flow to the FMLN.

Although the opposition coalition was voted into power in Nicaragua, the president, Violeta Chamorro, had little choice but to leave the Sandinista military apparatus untouched. The army was greatly reduced, but the Sandinistas remained in control. While it is not known whether the army maintained an institutional policy to aid the FMLN against the policy of the new Nicaraguan government, it is known that numbers of Sandinista officers continued to funnel weapons and ammunition to the Salvadoran guerrillas, either for reasons of ideological commitment or for profit.

Demobilization of the majority of Nicaragua's huge military machine left large quantities of weapons and equipment stockpiled around the country. Poor inventory procedures and security made these weapons easy to steal, and several junior grade officers were later convicted of selling these weapons to the FMLN guerrillas for money. Apparently,

quite a trafficking network was established, as ex-Sandinista weapons have turned up in Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, and several other places.

As mentioned before, the main logistical problem for the FMLN was not the weapons and equipment per se, but rather getting that materiel into El Salvador. An extension of this problem was to get this materiel from the borders of El Salvador to the war fronts and combat units where it was needed.

The internal distribution of weapons was very distinct from the shipment of weapons to El Salvador from the outside. Within the FMLN organization was a man in each camp, each front, and each organization who held the title of logistician. The logistician was the key individual for the movement and storage of weapons and ammunition. Only the logistician controlled the rationing of weapons and ammunition within a camp. Because of this, the logisticians were considered very important people and worked closely with the commanders of the camps, units, fronts, and organizations. The separateness of the logistician was an intentional characteristic of this position and was an attempt by the FMLN to keep general knowledge of the location, quantities, and movement of weapons from the mass of the guerrilla combatants and sympathizers. The FMLN found in the early years that captured guerrillas talked too freely, and as a consequence the FMLN lost a lot of hard-to-replace materiel to government raids.

Near each camp was a cache in which arms and ammunition were kept. Most caches consisted of large rooms dug into the earth that were equipped to store weapons, ammunition, batteries, explosives, and other equipment, and keep them safe from the elements. These rooms usually had small and easily camouflaged entrances.

Each camp had a number of caches depending on the number of personnel. However, on top of this, the FPL and ERP, organizations with the greatest number of people, resources, and experience, had warehouse-size caches located at strategic points such as El Tigre hill, Usulután and Jucuarán, La Unión. These were used by the ERP. The FPL had large caches on Guazapa Mountain, Cuscatlán, and Arcatao, Chalatenango. These deposits were where the weapons from foreign countries were collected and then distributed to camps on all the war fronts. The location of these deposits was kept highly secret, and was known only to a few commanders and logisticians of very high rank. The area around the deposits was permanently mined and important units of strategic mobile forces and special select forces were used to guard them.

On top of the rural weapons deposits, the FMLN set up several large deposits of weapons in San Salvador and San Miguel for the use of the urban commandos and for use during the urban offensives they planned. Army intelligence was able to detect and capture some of the urban de-

posits. Two of these made major headlines. The first was captured around April or May of 1989 and contained over 300 AK-47 rifles and large quantities of other weapons and material. Dan Quayle, then vice president of the United States, visited El Salvador and posed for the camera holding an RPG-7 rocket launcher from this haul backwards. The second, during the 1989 offensive, was the deposit of largely ammunition, mortar rounds, and explosives captured in the backyard of a young American woman working in El Salvador, who apparently used her position in a religious group as cover for running logistical missions for the ERP urban commandos in San Salvador.¹²

Even though the FMLN received great quantities of weapons from outside El Salvador, over 600 tons in the first few years alone, it also implemented a plan for the massive creation of homemade weaponry such as mortars, rifle grenades, and mines. The refugee camps in Honduras, such as Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua, played an important role in this plan. They provided large quantities of material for the manufacture of mines and homemade weapons. Another important role played by these camps was in the manufacture and provision of uniforms for the guerrillas.

The organizations of the FMLN developed several methods to support their combat units with basic needs, food, clothing, medicine, weapons, and ammunition. The weapons and ammunition aspect has already been described, but the other things were nearly as important.

In the first years of the conflict (1980-1984), all of the guerrilla organizations carried their civilian elements (called masses) with them. The masses were groups of civilians who sympathized with the FMLN cause. Many times they were the relatives and friends of the guerrilla combatants. In the camps these people would be in charge of providing the food and doing most of the labor for the guerrillas. When the armed forces carried out operations in the areas of greatest guerrilla persistence, the masses would accompany the guerrillas withdrawing before the army offensive. However, the FMLN soon found that the masses slowed down the guerrillas and made them vulnerable to attack. It made it very difficult for the FMLN to keep its movements secret, as most of the masses were women, old people, and children. Furthermore, the withdrawal of the masses depopulated the guerrilla zones of persistence and made it difficult for guerrillas to operate in that area because all of their civilian support was now gone. The system of using the masses to do the labor and prepare the food soon became impractical, especially in the face of intense army pressure.

From 1985 on, the masses became separated from the guerrilla units and as a consequence the FMLN had to adopt a new logistics system to keep its units operating in the field. Starting in 1985, the local guerrillas of each front organized production committees to perform the tasks pre-

viously done by the masses. These committees were organized using sympathizers, family members, and militias, and were located in the hamlets along the borders of the guerrillas' area of persistence.

The local guerrillas were in charge of collecting war taxes from the more uncooperative locals, which could be paid in goods, crops, or money. They also gathered the goods and food produced by the production committees. To move these goods from the collection points to the combat units, "ant columns" were established. The ant columns transported the supplies by man, pack mule, or in small trucks to a place near the camps. The camps were in charge of picking up the goods from the drop-off points and preparing these supplies for consumption. Instead of civilians, each guerrilla unit had its own cooks and servers that travelled permanently with the column. These cooks and servers would gather the supplies from the drop-off points, little by little, as the supplies were needed. In this way, only a few people at a time moved back and forth from the camp. This kept the location of the camps more secret and also guaranteed the secret of who, what, how, and when the supplies were being collected and delivered. The FMLN found the ant column to be much more effective and resilient than the large groups of masses.

The ration for combatants was varied, but consisted mostly of a piece of hard molasses, a piece of cheese, a couple of tortillas, and coffee per meal. This was the usual ration when the guerrillas were operating away from camp. When they were stationed at their camps conducting training, the food was more varied and served in much larger quantities.

A fact that must not be overlooked is that the FMLN received massive amounts of foreign medical aid, including equipment and drugs. In Chalatenango and Morazan there were clandestine hospitals that could carry out major surgery including amputation and the fitting of prosthetic devices. There were hospitals on Guazapa Mountain with similar capability. Many foreign doctors served with the FMLN, especially doctors from Europe and Latin America.

Each camp had a person known as a brigadist, which was the FMLN jargon for a paramedic. This person was to provide first aid to those wounded in combat and transport the more seriously wounded to clandestine hospitals.

In general, all of the logistical system and especially the transportation of weapons from one place to another was carried out at night using local guerrillas and masses, especially when dealing with large quantities of supplies. The most common methods were to transport these items on muleback, or on the individual shoulders of the people in the ant column. However, in the areas of greatest guerrilla persistence, such as in the strategic rearguard, weapons, ammunition, and explosives were transported in large trucks when there were no army operations.

In the final analysis, one of the constant lessons of war is that without

the means to fight and to sustain the war effort, a fighting force is doomed. In addition, having a large supply of weapons, equipment, and men is absolutely useless unless you can deliver those men and their equipment and weapons effectively to the point at which they are needed, at the time they are needed. As implied in the opening section of this chapter, strategy and tactics mean nothing if they are not backed up by a solid logistical system. One of the great accomplishments of the FMLN and the forces that supported it was that of setting up a sound logistical foundation. This logistical foundation operated with little change throughout the conflict, and is one of the key reasons the FMLN was able to last for over twelve years of bitter conflict.

NOTES

1. "Bulletin Board," *Soldier of Fortune* (April 1994): 8.
2. Republican Study Committee, *Nicaraguan and Cuban Support of Revolution in Central America: The Testimony of a Salvadoran Guerrilla* (Washington, D.C., 1984).
3. Uri Ra'naan et al., *Hydra of Carnage: International Linkages of Terrorism* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1986). See Appendix.
4. FMLN, *Informe y Análisis Visto Desde el Exterior* (Nicaragua, March 11–13, 1981), captured from guerrillas in 1981.
5. Interview with FMLN guerrilla who had been a truck driver for the FMLN, San Salvador, March 1990.
6. FMLN, *Informe y Análisis Visto Desde el Exterior*.
7. Lance Motley, *Soldier of Fortune* (April 1988).
8. Peter Kokalis, *Soldier of Fortune* (November 1983).
9. The author saw these weapons personally in each of the countries mentioned. They were very easy to spot because of the telltale quarter-size hole in the magazine well.
10. Interview with high-ranking FPL defector who spent time in the United States as a clandestine member of an FMLN support group.
11. Jack Calhoun, "Bush Uses Ploy to Win Contra Aid," *The Guardian* (June 7, 1989): 9.
12. Interview with a captured ERP urban commando, March 1990, who clearly identified the woman as being a member of the logistics command group of the ERP urban commandos.

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